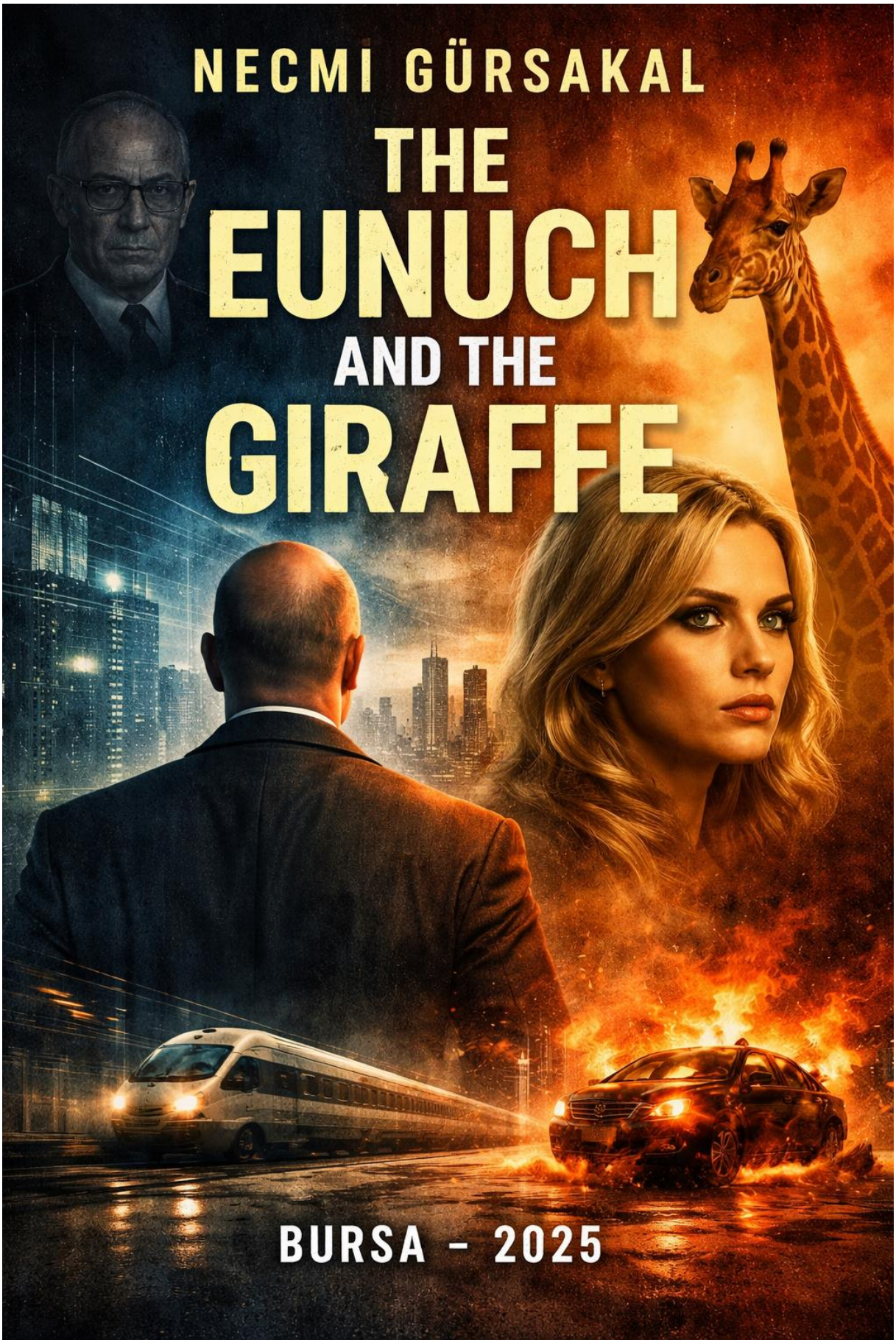
THE EUNUCH AND THE GIRAFFE

NECMİ GÜRSAKAL

Bursa – 2025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Editor: Ceyhun Erim

"Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet."

Rudyard Kipling
The Ballad of East and West

Unemployed and Alone

My name is Clark Kane. I am not successful, but I am curious. When I was a child, my mother used to say, "Curiosity won't kill the cat—it will kill you," yet she also saw my curiosity as a sign that I would one day be successful. But my future turned out nothing like she had hoped. As Carl Sagan once said, it always felt to me as if something incredible was waiting to be discovered somewhere. Yet no matter what I did, no matter how hard I worked, I was never able to become "successful."

When I first watched *The Truman Show*, directed by Peter Weir, I tried to figure out whether the world I lived in was fake. For a while, I lived believing that my life was actually a giant television program. Now, I had become an unemployed and lonely journalist, endlessly wandering around, constantly questioning the meaning of life.

Uncertainty was increasing day by day all over the world. Recently, I watched a short documentary by Martin Scorsese titled *Slavery in the Name of Progress*. Unlike animals, we could ask the question "Why?" and thus move forward. But when we considered where that progress was taking us, we often encountered answers that were impossible to unravel. As artificial intelligence was radically transforming media, advertising, and even everyday life, I no longer believed I would ever find a job again.

My Irish-born father, who had died two years ago, was a rather peculiar Englishman. He loved the rock band U2, especially the song *Where the Streets Have No Name*. He would often imitate Bono, singing: "The city's a flood / And our love turns to rust."

When my father named me Clark, I doubt he ever asked my Indian mother's opinion. To be honest, I still don't understand how my father—who disliked Indian food—and my mother—who hated the English and smelled of curry—ever got married. Their wedding witnesses must have been that grotesque thing called globalization.

Whatever the case, time had turned their love into rust. For years, they had stood guard over a marriage they both knew was wrong, and with my father's death, that vigil finally ended. I remember my father once describing his marriage like this: "Globalization, which scattered the English to India and Indians to England, doesn't always produce meaningful results. Love, too, can turn into rust."

After my father died, my mother suddenly adopted the mood of the song: "I want to run, I want to hide / I want to tear down the walls that hold me inside / I want to reach out and touch the flame." Leaving behind her only son—whose past consisted of nothing more than a few broken relationships—in a devastating loneliness, she said, like a line from a Bollywood film, "No matter how much time has passed, a person must eventually return home," and went back to India.

It was obvious that my father had named me after Superman comics. Still, I don't think he imagined an unemployed, aimless Superman. Sadly, I always felt like a son determined to disappoint him. After he died, he was lucky not to see me spend the money he had saved over years of hard work, or sell a few of his favorite antiques. If he had, he would probably have disowned me.

Now I live in a small house near the University of Cambridge. In the evenings, I go to a pub on the corner called *Heartbreak Hotel*, named after Elvis Presley's famous song. The only decoration in the pub is a large Elvis poster behind its gray bar. One night, when I asked the bartender why the bar was gray, he said, "Gray is the color of disappointment." For some reason, at that moment, I remembered the last time my mother looked at me at the airport before returning to India after my father's funeral.

With its blue windows and a large 1995 crest on the wall, the pub felt like a refuge for the broken-hearted and the lonely. My father, who had worked for a while in the United Arab Emirates, used to tell me about "the unfortunate Bedouin who encounters a polar bear in the desert." Now I understood him better.

As I said, I am not a successful man. After my father's death, my mother returned to India and began living with relatives. I also disappointed her dreams of having grandchildren. Even my mother, who had been incredibly persistent about marriage, eventually accepted that I would never marry and stopped sending me photos of suitable girls from Kerala.

Once, when I said, "I'm sorry" to her, she hummed Elton John's *Sorry Seems to Be the Hardest Word*:
"It's sad, so sad / It's a sad, sad situation / And it's getting more and more absurd / It seems to me / Sorry seems to be the hardest word." That part of the song suited me so well that, like my mother, I loved to hum it.

Then one day, in the midst of all this emptiness and lack of expectation, I met a Russian girl named Sofia at the pub, and suddenly, every firework hidden in the corners of my mind exploded at once. I later learned that her father was a Russian oligarch. Sofia was very young, tall, with an elegant neck, and a beauty that almost radiated light. When I told a friend that the place seemed to brighten when she entered the pub, he said, "Don't exaggerate." But I wasn't exaggerating. Whenever she arrived, scenes from every romantic film seemed to come alive in my mind, and symphony orchestras began to play.

When we first met, Sofia laughed a lot at my name. Leaning toward my ear, she whispered, “Are you Superman? Do you have a red Superman costume with a cape and a big ‘S’ on your chest?” She had dropped out of university against her father’s wishes and was now thinking of writing a novel with the help of artificial intelligence. She followed scientific developments closely and talked about Demis Hassabis as a hero who had changed the future of humanity by solving protein folding.

Her parents had separated shortly after moving to England. Her mother, as she put it, had started living in another house in “Londongrad,” and later returned to Russia. I think Sofia liked *Heartbreak Hotel* because, like me, she found it a little melancholic. Somehow, she had moved from London to Cambridge. When she said, “Cambridge is nicer, London is too big,” her eyes sparkled.

One evening, Sofia said to me, “I want to write a novel about the conflict among today’s great powers—trade wars, technology, a bit of economics, a bit of mystery, a bit of humor… but never boring. You’re a former journalist, very talented; I’ve read your articles. I think we can do this together.”

Half-jokingly, I replied, “I’d die for a novel with your photos on the front and back covers.” Laughing, she said, “Don’t be ridiculous. Aren’t you English? I went to Istanbul a long time ago—Turks say things like ‘I’d die for it.’”

Another evening, when I saw her in a red polka-dot dress, there was an unfamiliar Chinese girl with her. For no particular reason, I thought of how red was the Chinese people’s favorite and most auspicious color. For them, red also kept evil spirits away. As Sofia downed Smirnoff vodkas one after another, she shouted, “Those bastards are showing us technological global hallucinations!” I couldn’t understand who she was angry at. The Chinese girl left as soon as she finished her drink. This time, Sofia bought me a beer. In the following days, beers and vodkas blended into each other, and we became each other’s closest friends.

The image of Sofia drinking vodka at the bar, the fatigue hidden behind her laughter, and the moment she whispered, “Are you Superman?” stayed with me. When I thought of her clothes, a parade of colors came to mind: red, black, pink, blue, white… The colors shimmered in the texture of fabrics, lace edges, and hangers—each like a different state of mind. At the forefront hung the red polka-dot dress.

Next to it, there must have been a black satin dress that hugged her body. I imagined that night: the Elvis poster, the gray bar, a shadow in Sofia’s eyes that seemed to say, “Gray is the color of disappointment.” On the lower rack, there was a pale pink chiffon dress that caught my attention. Still wrinkled, as if it had slept in the wind. It felt as though Sofia, wearing that dress, was walking through the streets of Cambridge, tossing her hair back and disappearing into the distance. At the bottom of the wardrobe, there was a cobalt blue evening dress made of silk, with a single strap over the shoulder—perhaps saved for a gala night with the thought, “I’ll wear it one day.” Later, I imagined her in the mornings, wrapped in a black velvet robe.

Clark Kane…

Clark seemed less like a human being and more like a physical manifestation of thought itself. His tall frame and slightly hunched posture carried a body worn down not by time, but by ideas. There was a fatigue in the way he stood—the fatigue of someone who had watched the world for far too long.

His face did not appear shaped by mathematical order, but by the subtlety of coincidence. Pale. Thin. The dark circles beneath his eyes were not carved by sleeplessness, but by consciousness. His eyes were gray, yet they shifted with the light—sometimes turning moss green, sometimes leaden. When he looked at you, he did not measure you, but the thought behind you. He did not hear what people said, but what they could not say.

His eyebrows were thick and unformed; his nose straight, his lips uncertain. There was an "incomplete symmetry" in everything about him, as if the universe had paused on his face just before reaching perfection. He rarely shaved—perhaps he did not wish to let time touch him. His hair, dark brown and wavy, resembled an organism with a life of its own. Sometimes he would run his hand through it, scattering it as he did his thoughts.

His clothes… were like a second consciousness hanging on him. Dark tones, faded shirts, misbuttoned cuffs. A kind of unintentional disorder—yet never accidental. Every wrong button was a choice, every worn sleeve a story. On the rare days he remembered to wear a classic jacket, his collar was almost always crooked. His style was not in harmony with time, but in resistance to it. He did not wear a watch; he carried time in his pocket. Perhaps he did not wish to kill time, but to live quietly alongside it.

Clark's meals were the same. Simple, yet carrying a kind of nostalgia within them. Eggs and coffee for breakfast; salad or fish at noon; pasta with tomato sauce or mushroom soup in the evening. Nothing was ambitious, yet everything concealed a meaning—as if he were trying to hide a fragment of the past within the emptiness of the present. When he ate apple pie for dessert, a faint sense of peace would appear on his face. I could never tell whether that peace belonged to his childhood, or to someone he had lost.

He loved coffee. But for him, coffee was not a drink—it was a ritual. A substance that filtered his thoughts. One day he told me, "Coffee organizes the silence inside the mind." In that moment, I understood—nothing in Clark Kane's world was ever merely what it seemed.

And perhaps that was why he was so difficult to understand. Clark was caught between living and thinking. There was a fatigue in his body, and a constant alertness in his mind. A man who analyzed everything, yet never judged. Standing beside him sometimes felt like standing in a laboratory—quiet, sterile, and unsettlingly honest.

And yet… behind that dark and disordered appearance, there was a fragile elegance. His clothing, his food, his silence—all were fragments of a soul that had created its own system. Clark Kane was less a man than an equation: one that refused to be solved, yet compelled you to try.

My Giraffe

Sofia, having plenty of money, never hesitated to buy beer for everyone—and for me. At night, we would sit for hours at *Heartbreak Hotel*, talking about the relationship between artificial intelligence and biology, mirror neurons, collective intelligence, and the like. Sofia would say, laughing, "The Americans stopped racing the Russians in space, and now they've started racing the Chinese in artificial intelligence," then she would add, "I guess they got bored of us."

Among the things that surprised her most was Elon Musk's description of artificial intelligence as "the greatest existential threat," his comparison of its development to "summoning the demon," and his claim that "climate change is bad, but it won't kill everyone—AI might destroy humanity."

Sofia had read and greatly admired an article I had once written, titled *Can Trees Be Spies?*, in which I argued that trees might possess a form of collective intelligence and communicate through their roots—though, for now, this remained within the realm of science fiction. She had learned that collective intelligence—the shared intelligence emerging from the collaboration and interaction of individuals—could produce understanding, knowledge, or solutions beyond what any individual could achieve alone, and she had even mentioned this to her father.

Her favorite piece of mine on the subject, however, was about the Athenian general and historian Thucydides, describing how an army calculated the height of a city wall using collective intelligence during a siege. According to Thucydides, the soldiers counted the layers of bricks in the wall, averaged their counts, and multiplied the result by the thickness of a single brick.

Sofia had an extraordinarily long neck of breathtaking beauty, reminiscent of Queen Nefertiti of Egypt and the old film star Audrey Hepburn. It made me think that, at school, she might have been nicknamed "giraffe." When I asked her, she would laugh and tell me that, because of this resemblance, she had studied giraffes. In China, she explained, giraffes were considered auspicious because they resembled the mythical creature called Qilin. She spoke of the roles giraffes had played in international diplomacy—used by leaders to form alliances, make gestures of goodwill, and even as tools in political bargaining.

Sofia seemed to know, almost by heart, everything that had ever happened to giraffes in history. The Byzantine Emperor Michael Palaiologos had once paraded a giraffe, gifted by the King of Abyssinia, through the streets of Constantinople for days to entertain the people. Long ago, when a giraffe was taken to England, a hole had to be cut into the deck of a Maltese ship for its long neck, and it arrived in London with injured legs. Another giraffe, taken to France,

had drawn massive crowds as it walked hundreds of kilometers from Marseille to Paris. Caesar, it seemed, had also owned a giraffe—the first ever brought to Europe—which was later killed by lions, yet had helped consolidate his power in Rome. Because it was thought to combine features of a camel and a leopard, it had been called a "cameleopard."

Sofia would almost drown me in giraffe stories, speaking endlessly: "The giraffe is a creature with a small head and a long neck, almost like a unicorn without the horn—an outsider, an 'other.' I don't have a horn, but people who aren't used to it look at it as if it came from another world. What triggers that perception is its unusual proportions. Its neck is so long that it isn't suited for making sounds. They are silent creatures, rarely producing noises like groans or murmurs."

No matter what she told me, my mind would drift to the French poet Jean Cocteau's words about Audrey Hepburn: "She is moonlight in daylight." To me, Sofia was like a giraffe who had forgotten she was Russian.

Two days later, when she brought me a novel titled *Giraffe*, I asked her, "Could your surname be Giraffe?" She laughed and replied, "It would be nice, actually—but where would you find a giraffe in Russia? My surname is Romanov." Sofia Romanov—my giraffe from Russia—had now become the love of my life.

For a couple of days, I reread parts of the novel she had given me. Its author, J. M. Ledgard, was not only a kind of zoo enthusiast but also a correspondent for *The Economist*. While stationed in Prague in the late 1990s, he had learned about the story of the giraffe massacre at Dvůr Králové and later wrote a book about this true yet still secret episode in the Czech Republic, published in 2006. In this novel set in Czechoslovakia, Ledgard depicted how far human stupidity and arrogance could go when combined with a closed and inhumane political system.

The story went like this: Between 1965 and 1983, Josef Vágner, the director of the zoo in the town of Dvůr Králové, had a profound impact on both the development of the zoo and wildlife conservation at the height of the communist regime. Under his supervision, eight expeditions were organized to African countries, and around 2,000 animals were brought to Czechoslovakia. The zoo eventually became one of Europe's most important gene banks. The giraffes thrived, reproduced, and became the largest captive herd.

Then, for reasons that were never fully explained, on May 1, 1975, the secret police sealed off the town and the zoo, shot 49 giraffes—23 of them pregnant—and covered it all up. It is possible that the giraffes had contracted a deadly form of foot-and-mouth disease. In the novel, the zoo director says, "The new giraffes will adapt to the Czechoslovak winters. They will learn to move on ice," while the veterinarian disagrees: "They will be like girls returning from a dance in high heels." The novel also describes, at length, how giraffes were like delicate figurines, radiating elegance and grace.

After finishing the book, when I saw Sofia, I embraced her and said, “You are my high-heeled, figurine-like giraffe.”

One of the realities that saddened Sofia most about animals was the fate of cicadas: after spending 17 years underground feeding on the sap of tree roots, they would emerge only to die within two to four weeks. For her, there was no sadder song in the world than the chorus sung by cicadas in unison.

Rachmaninoff’s Second Piano Concerto

Sofia would talk endlessly about classical music, and I would listen to her, mesmerized.

“Clark, listen—if I don’t tell you this, I’ll go crazy… When I hear Rachmaninoff’s Second Piano Concerto, my mind literally unravels. The moment the first notes begin, I think, ‘Oh my God, where did this sadness come from?’ And then suddenly, the music explodes—it’s as if it starts to dance—and my heart begins to race so fast that it feels like it’s running across the piano keys. Do you understand that?

And the second movement… oh my God, Clark, the second movement! It’s romantic—but such a kind of romance that it fills me completely with flowers, and I feel as if you are right beside me. It’s as though Rachmaninoff is describing a ‘state of vulnerability.’ Sometimes I even say to myself: ‘Alright, Sofia, you have to somehow convey these feelings to Clark.’ That’s why I’m telling you all this.

And in the third movement… ah, that third movement. It feels like the peak of a romantic journey. At that point, all emotions come together like a storm. And Clark, believe me, words are no longer enough—I just want to say, ‘This is it, all of life is here.’ Please don’t laugh at me…

And I’m not joking: when I was little, my father used to try to play it. I didn’t understand it back then, but now I realize that the music unlocks everything stored in both my memory and my heart. And Clark… what I want to tell you is this: this concerto is both fragile and powerful, both sorrowful and ecstatic. Sometimes, while listening, I look at you and smile; other times, I feel like crying.

Let me confess something—even once, during the third movement, I got so carried away that I accidentally knocked over a cup of tea and broke an antique cup. Don’t laugh—but at that moment, my mind was completely lost in the music, and suddenly I thought, ‘Everyone should feel this.’ That’s why I’m telling you. Clark, music affects me so deeply that sometimes, while talking to you, you’ll notice my eyes shining and me rambling… but that’s okay—you like that too, don’t you?”

And I Will Try to Fix You

I loved listening to Sofia. Love was not something that fit into calculation, planning, or reason. It was like a mad wind with no clear origin, racing through every street of my mind—seeking,

relentlessly, ways to surrender to an image, a scent, a tone of voice. Sofia was like a dream I saw with my eyes wide open in daylight. I wanted her beside me when I slept and when I woke, telling me about giraffes and cicadas.

I never listened to my friends who told me she belonged to a completely different world. As if enchanted, I listened to her, watched her, almost absorbed her into myself. When she was with me, all images and sounds seemed to reach me only after she had reshaped them. I could now understand much better why the Mughal Emperor had built the Taj Mahal for the woman he loved—even if I lacked the power to do anything remotely like it.

"Last night I had a strange dream," Sofia told me. "I was going with Darya Dugina—the daughter of Alexander Dugin, Putin's ideologue—to a village near Moscow in a Toyota Land Cruiser." Then, raising her right hand as if she herself couldn't quite understand it, she added, "Apparently we were going to a concert where Rachmaninoff's Second Concerto would be played. In real life I've never met her, but in the dream we were close. She was driving too fast, so I warned her to slow down. She said, 'Speed is beautiful, but…' We had to go fast because we were late for the concert. Her father had decided not to come at the last moment. Just as we saw the stage where the symphony orchestra was playing, the car exploded with a huge noise and a flash. Strangely, nothing happened to me—I watched the sparks from the explosion from outside, like fireflies. You remember, in 2022, Dugin's daughter was killed in almost exactly this way. Russia blamed Ukraine."

Sensing her sadness, I embraced her. I told her—half jokingly—that I was very skilled at making up dream interpretations. Perhaps, I said, she was going to buy a Toyota Land Cruiser. Then I added that it was absurd, because buying such a car for her would mean nothing.

Another night, Sofia came to the pub holding a book by Sally Adee titled *We Are Electric*, which explored the merging of biology and electronics and described how bioelectricity flows through every cell, muscle, and layer of our bodies. She asked me whether I had ever heard of Michael Levin, who worked at Tufts University in Massachusetts. She went on at length about how tissue regeneration and even cancer treatment might be achieved through the bioelectric signals between cells, helping the body to heal itself. Biological electrical signals, she explained, were among the fundamental building blocks of life, and the discoveries in this field had the potential to revolutionize medical treatment.

While I was talking lightly about things like the idea of "felt temperature" being analogous to a kind of "felt love," she was telling me about Levin's research, funded by a 16-million-dollar grant from DARPA—the U.S. Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency.

Levin had demonstrated that by applying only electrical signals to a frog embryo, it was possible to move its eyes from the head to the torso—changing form without altering genetic structure. Sofia spoke with incredible excitement about how Levin was exploring ways to harness natural bioelectricity through artificial stimulation—how he had grown an eye on a

frog's stomach, regenerated a severed frog limb, and was now working on regrowing the fingers of mice.

A Russian friend of hers who joined us at the pub added to this excitement by arguing that large language models and artificial intelligence were not being trained using the dark web due to restricted or illegal content—but that if they were, AI might advance even further. I listened to them for a while and thought to myself that perhaps I did not know Sofia at all.

The love I felt grew so quickly that within a week or two, she had become my "figurine giraffe." Sofia, whose earlobes I loved to kiss, took me out of the pub one night, saying, "Let's go to your place." On the way, she loudly sang, fully embracing the beers she had drunk, from Coldplay:
"Lights will guide you home / And ignite your bones / And I will try to fix you."

That night, we went to my house.

"I would have expected a Superman poster in your house, but there isn't one," Sofia said, as she carefully examined a photograph on my desk. In it, I was with Daniel—the son of my friend, economics professor Eleanor Davies—standing among fishermen on the Senkaku Islands in eastern China.

For me, it was an incredibly long night—one in which I realized I had fallen madly in love with her. It felt as though my loneliness had ended, as though my life had acquired a new meaning. With Sofia, it was as if we had been together for years. That night, she became quite drunk. At one point, she mentioned several times that she had heard from someone that Daniel Davies—the son of Professor Eleanor Davies from Cambridge's Department of Politics and International Studies—had been my close friend since childhood. I was drunk too, and didn't think much of it.

The next day, we went together to a shop called Teremok, which sold Russian goods. We bought beets, potatoes, onions, carrots, and garlic, then returned home and drank the borscht soup she made. She said it would have been better if we had gone to *Borscht n Tears*, a famous Russian and Ukrainian restaurant in Knightsbridge, London, open since 1965, where we could have eaten and drunk vodka with live music. But since her father and his friends often went there, she didn't want to.

I loved her, but when I asked her to stay one more night, she said, "Are you crazy? Do you want my father to have you killed?"

"And weren't you going to try to fix me?" I asked.

Leaning close to my ear, she whispered with a laugh, "My father fixes things… completely."

After that, we didn't see each other for about a week.

Kerala in My Heart

My mother called me that night, her voice warm and loving, tinged with a slight Indian accent. “My son! How are you? Is Cambridge still that cold, gray town? Are you still going to the Heartbreak Hotel and feeling lonely?”

I smiled faintly. “Ah, Mom… yes, the pub is still the same gray. But at least Elvis is still standing behind the bar. We make eye contact.”

“Elvis? You’re still stuck in the dreams of the past. Clark, I warned you—curiosity wouldn’t kill the cat, it would kill you. But you didn’t listen,” she replied.

“I did listen, but curiosity is still alive in me. Look, maybe I’m still here to discover something. I know I seem unsuccessful, but… I haven’t lost my curiosity,” I said.

Her voice hardened slightly. “Unsuccessful, yes… but my heart still aches because you are my son. Clark, I am always worried about you. You’re alone, unemployed, and your love life is still… hmm… complicated.” I had told her about Sofia in an earlier conversation. Then our exchange continued:

— Mom, by complicated, do you mean Sofia?
— That girl? That young, bright Russian girl? Clark, you’re still drifting on your own. I’m here in Kerala, praying for you. But you need to grow up, my son!
— I know, Mom… I’m trying. But things are complicated. Everything in the world is changing so fast. Artificial intelligence, trade wars… sometimes it feels like everyone is acting in a movie, and I’m still an extra waiting at the backstage door.
— My son… Clark… never forget that my door is always open to you. Whether it’s Cambridge, India, or the other side of the world—you will always have a place in my heart.
— Thank you. One day… maybe I’ll come to India. But for now, I’m staying here.
— Good… but Clark, don’t wait for me—find your own path. Just remember: this place will always be an option. Always.

When I hung up, silence settled heavily over the room. My heart felt both lighter and slightly bruised. My mother was still there, in Kerala, living her life in her own rhythm—but whenever I felt the presence of those distant lands, I swayed between peace and loneliness.

Evening had fallen over Cambridge. The yellow glow of street lamps spilled onto the narrow stone pavements. My heart still echoed with my mother’s voice, as if with every step I took, her words—“going home is always an option”—rang in my ears.

When I entered the Heartbreak Hotel, the pub was still gray—but this gray felt a little less painful than the loneliness I carried inside. My eyes immediately searched for Sofia. There she was, sitting in the corner of the bar in her red polka-dot dress, sipping her drink. As I sat on the empty stool beside her, my mother’s words and Sofia’s radiance collided in my mind: distant Kerala on one side, vibrant, luminous Sofia on the other.

“Clark, you look a bit restless tonight,” Sofia said.

“Yes… I spoke with my mother. She keeps inviting me to India. But I’m here. Sometimes I feel like I’m lost in the middle of the world.”

Sofia fixed her eyes on me. Her glow flickered slightly, as if she understood my loneliness. “Sometimes we feel lost in the middle of nowhere, but what matters is finding the way. I don’t know whether your path is here or in Kerala. But I think what matters is where your heart is,” she said.

Clark fell silent for a moment and took a sip of his beer. His thoughts drifted into the past: his father’s dreams when he named him Superman, the loneliness left behind by his mother’s return to India, the gray bar of the Heartbreak Hotel, the gaze of the Elvis poster… all tangled together in his mind.

“Maybe you’re right, Sofia. Maybe failure, curiosity, and loneliness are a story of their own kind. And maybe my story begins here—at the Heartbreak Hotel, and with you,” I said.

Sofia smiled softly. “Then let’s write it, Clark… but let it not be boring,” she replied.

I turned my eyes toward the Elvis poster behind the bar. The gray was still there—but somehow, it felt warmer now. I took another sip of beer and looked out the window. Cambridge’s narrow streets, the coolness of the evening, and my mother in distant Kerala… all of it was part of my story.

And for the first time, beyond failure and loneliness, I saw a possibility: to write the story of my own life by my own rules.

Circular Movements in the Pupils

Just then, my former editor-in-chief—who had sent me a news article from the newspaper where I used to work—asked me via email whether I would consider going to China to investigate the issue:

“A Strange Illness in China’s Border Regions: Circular Movements in Pupils Cause Panic May 18, 2025 – AP

A mysterious health phenomenon in recent days has caused widespread panic among the public in the rural and mountainous regions of northwestern China, near the borders with Russia and India. According to local sources, dozens of individuals have begun to exhibit sudden, circular movements in their pupils. This phenomenon, not yet scientifically defined, has led to various speculations on social media and among the public.

Some residents claim that these unusual eye movements are a sign that a ‘demonic entity’ has taken control of the human body. In certain villages where religious beliefs are strong, people are demanding that affected individuals be isolated for ‘purification.’

However, conspiracy theories do not end there. Some suggest that this is evidence that artificial intelligence has begun infiltrating the human nervous system. According to proponents of this

theory, the movements in the pupils may indicate moments when externally transmitted digital signals reach the brain. Others argue that it could be an experiment conducted by extraterrestrial beings.

In response to rising concerns, the Chinese government announced that it has established a Beijing-based research team and dispatched neurology and ophthalmology specialists to the region to closely monitor these cases. This scientific team has begun examining the brain activity of individuals at the moments when these circular pupil movements occur. Although initial findings have not yet been shared, some experts suggest that this may be the sign of a new neurological syndrome.

Neighboring India has also expressed concern after reporting several similar cases in its border regions. India's Ministry of Health has requested assistance from the United States to investigate this unusual condition. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) stated that they are awaiting official data from China and have not yet taken direct action.

This mysterious illness and the accompanying theories have caused fear to grow steadily among the public. The social exclusion of affected individuals has led to collective prayers and rituals in some areas, while governments' responses to the issue are being closely watched.

The scientific community is trying to determine whether this phenomenon is truly a new medical condition or a case of mass psychological reaction. But one thing is certain: these mysterious movements in the pupils have unsettled not only China but the entire region."

I had no intention of going to China. Every night, I was busy waiting for Sofia at the pub and loving her. For a while, my childhood friend Daniel Davies, who had returned from Nigeria to England, and I discussed whether the news might be real. He didn't know either. There was no clear indication of its authenticity. Sofia, on the other hand, said that if she were offered such an opportunity, she would go to China and that I was missing out on a great deal.

That night at the pub, I heard from two friends working in the Department of Politics and International Studies at the university that Alfred, one of the regulars, had beaten his wife so badly that she was hospitalized. While I was burning with love for my figurine giraffe, conversations about the details of a room being prepared for three professors who would write a report at the university did not interest me at all, yet I pretended to listen.

Two weeks later, one night at the pub, one of the staff told me that Sofia had called and asked whether she could bring a large framed Superman poster to hang on the pub wall—and that she had received permission from the owner. I waited for her excitedly that night, but she didn't come. Just when I had completely given up hope, she suddenly appeared one evening, hung that enormous poster on the wall with the staff, and then asked me whether I liked it. I had no chance of not liking it—she was perfectly aware that I was hopelessly in love with her.

That night, she said she didn't want to drink and wanted to talk about writing a novel together with the help of artificial intelligence. For her sake, I had no choice but to ask the AI: "We want to write a novel together—can you tell us what we should do?"

After receiving the response, Sofia said, "We have a long road ahead." Even though she didn't drink, I got very drunk that night and couldn't keep my lips away from her earlobes. "No drinking tomorrow night—we're going to work. We'll put what the AI tells us in italics in the novel," she said and left. As she went, she stroked my hair and said, "Good night, dark boy," probably to emphasize the traces of my Indian mother reflected in my face.

When I got home that night, I called my mother and talked about Sofia until she was exhausted. My mother was not pleased that Sofia's father was an oligarch. Anxiously, she said, "As far as I know, these oligarchs are very rich and very powerful Russians. I think they are involved in arms-related business. I remember reading somewhere that a former FBI agent was accused of helping a Russian oligarch. Son, these are dangerous men."

According to my mother, I should be with either an English or an Indian woman; otherwise, I might open the door to a failed marriage like hers with my father. I told her that I had seen Sofia's father's photograph in the newspaper and that he didn't look so frightening. Before hanging up, I said, "Do you think this girl loves me? I'm not so sure that she does."

Shortly after I ended the call, my former editor-in-chief called me again—this time by phone—asking whether I had read the new article he had sent to my email and reminding me that his offer regarding China still stood. This time, the article contained evidence suggesting that the phenomenon was real:

"Mysterious Eye Movements Spread: Fear Deepens Along the China–Russia–India Border May 25, 2025 – AP

The mysterious condition that emerged last week in northwestern China, marked by strange circular movements in human pupils, had already drawn global attention. Over the past week, new developments have occurred, and the number of cases has increased significantly. It is now clear that this is not merely a local rumor but a phenomenon confirmed by concrete incidents.

First Video Recordings Emerge. A healthcare worker in the city of Aksu, in China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, became a focal point after sharing footage on social media. The video clearly shows a patient's pupils moving clockwise and counterclockwise as if controlled by an independent mechanism. The video quickly spread beyond China and was viewed millions of times worldwide.

The Chinese government did not deny the authenticity of the footage; on the contrary, Professor Liang Chen from Peking University Medical School confirmed that the patient's brain MRI showed 'a hyperactive thalamus and abnormal pineal gland activity.' This finding reveals an unexpected connection between eye movements and brain function.

Cluster Case Report: A School Evacuated. In a middle school whose name has not been disclosed, five students exhibited these eye movements on the same day. The school was temporarily closed, students were quarantined, and disinfection procedures were carried out around the premises. School administrators reported that the children did not experience seizures but showed brief lapses in consciousness during the episodes.

Official Appeal from India to the United States. Following three similar cases reported in the state of Arunachal Pradesh, India formally appealed to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). India's Minister of Health, Rajiv Kulkarni, stated, 'We see that this is not a local issue but one with international implications. Therefore, we need global scientific cooperation.'

The CDC announced that it has formed a special team to analyze samples from China and India and that initial laboratory results would be completed within ten days.

Conspiracy Theories Persist: AI or Aliens? Despite these developments, public speculation continues. Some religious groups still view the phenomenon as a 'sign of demons,' while in some Chinese cities people believe that wearing glasses can protect them from 'eye tracking.' Meanwhile, certain comments circulating on social media suggest that these cases are part of AI-driven mind-control experiments or an extraterrestrial intervention.

China Expands Official Research Group China's National Health Commission announced that additional neurosurgeons, psychiatrists, and biologists have been added to the research team established for this issue. It was also stated that investigations would be expanded to include not only medical aspects but also electromagnetic environmental factors and neural frequency interactions.

The reality of these pupil movements is now based not only on rumors but also on documented cases, video evidence, and official statements. This mysterious phenomenon, expanding day by day, continues to generate both scientific curiosity and public anxiety. The world is trying to uncover the secret behind these eyes."

My former editor-in-chief kept using a method that activated every gene, cell, and hormone in me related to "curiosity," repeatedly emphasizing that the story concerned China—a subject I was deeply interested in. If Sofia hadn't been in my life, I might have been on a plane to China even after the first article. That evening, when he called me once more, I said, "You know I would get involved in this under any circumstances—except love. This time, your rival is love."

He laughed and replied, "Don't I know what a rascal you are?" and hung up.

Three Days of the Condor

Sofia was like a cormorant—she would often disappear and then suddenly reappear. One night when she showed up, as we talked, we discovered that we both loved old films of Peter Sellers. Her favorite was Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb, set during the Cold War. My father loved that film too. Sofia was fascinated by the bizarre, former-

Nazi scientist Dr. Strangelove and would describe him with laughter. What amused her most was the character of General Jack D. Ripper of the U.S. Air Force, who orders an unauthorized nuclear strike on the Soviet Union and is a paranoid commander convinced that communists are sabotaging the "bodily fluids" of the American people.

She loved the past; she simply couldn't understand why I would ever consider selling the antiques I inherited from my father. Sometimes, she even dreamed of living in Tsarist Russia. When I asked her why she was so drawn to the past, she gave me a strange answer: "Because we didn't die back then." Another day, she asked, "If you were a soldier ordered to launch a nuclear strike against Russia or another country, would you press the button?" I didn't know. I tried to explain that it would depend on how I had been trained as a soldier.

She went on at length about how, when she lived in Russia, she believed she had a purpose; that people in the East lived for a purpose, whereas in the West people lived without one—and that I, too, had no real purpose. Then she asked if I knew Vasili Arkhipov. I didn't.

Arkhipov, she said, was a distant relative on her mother's side and had been the second-in-command of a nuclear submarine flotilla in 1962. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, when Soviet submarines approached Cuba and the Bahamas, U.S. President John F. Kennedy announced the blockade of Cuba on television. The U.S. Navy then sent additional ships and aircraft to force Arkhipov's flotilla to surface. In short, the world stood on the brink of nuclear war.

According to Soviet naval procedure, launching a nuclear torpedo required the approval of three officers: the captain, the Communist Party representative, and Arkhipov as second-in-command. The first two approved the launch—but Arkhipov refused, preventing a nuclear catastrophe and pulling the world back from the edge.

In 1961, while serving as deputy commander on another nuclear submarine, Arkhipov had already faced a reactor cooling failure that risked a nuclear meltdown. Fifteen sailors later died from radiation exposure. Arkhipov himself suffered lasting damage and died in 1998.

Sofia told me how even Arkhipov's wife never knew where he was going when he left home, how a soldier would deliver his fur-lined leather military coat before long missions—and then, eventually, she suggested that we should write a novel about Arkhipov's life as well. Only then did I begin to understand what she had been saying all along. She had a purpose; I did not. Perhaps she didn't love me—perhaps she only wanted to write a novel with me.

A former friend of hers—perhaps it was Daniel Davies—had recommended me to her for an AI-assisted novel and had given her a piece I had written titled *"Father, They Don't Know What They're Doing."* For reasons I couldn't yet understand, that text had affected her deeply enough that she began frequenting this pub, far from her home, and gradually drew closer to me.

I would learn much later that this wasn't the whole story. Somehow, they had treated my article as a piece of intelligence. In particular, they had fixated on a sentence: *"If I were China, I would do whatever it takes to ensure that President Trump remains America's president*

forever." It seemed that Sofia's father might also have been involved. That sentence had been flagged as a high-risk expression by systems scanning for signs of foreign interference, and Sofia had been tasked with establishing a connection with me. At the time, I had little interest in open-source intelligence—the kind that scans "data visible to everyone but noticed by few."

Much later, I remembered Three Days of the Condor, in which Robert Redford plays a CIA analyst working in the "Research and Analysis" division, reading books, magazines, newspapers, and novels—gathering intelligence from open sources. The film suggests that what matters is not just the existence of open sources, but their accessibility and publication.

Redford's role in the film is to detect suspicious patterns, recurring themes, and hidden signals in open sources to uncover possible plots or infiltrations. At the beginning of the film, he returns to his office one day to find all his colleagues murdered. By the end, he hands all the information he has to *The New York Times*, trusting in the power of public knowledge against corruption within the state.

But a CIA official asks him one final question:

"What if they don't publish it?"

"What made war inevitable
was the rise of Athens and the fear
that this instilled in Sparta."

Thucydides
History of the Peloponnesian War

They Don't Know What They're Doing, Father

Whether or not you believe that Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" while being crucified, people truly often do not know what they are doing. If you ask why they act as they do, they'll probably just say, "Everyone's doing it."

Believe it or not, these are the people who, without fully understanding how artificial neural networks work inside what they call "artificial intelligence," have built AI models that paved the way for economic, sociological, and biological revolutions. They are also the ones who dropped the atomic bomb first and then mourned, saying things like, "Now I am become Death." Maybe Sofia suggested we write a novel about her relative Arkhipov's life because of a sentence I had written. Let's not even consider how the U.S. and the USSR stepped back from the brink during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962.

For years, these people manipulate tariffs up and down, wage trade wars, and still produce weapons and bombs instead of butter and bread. Their ignorance, if anything, has probably increased over time. As Robert De Niro says in *Taxi Driver*, what do we say if the Chinese ask us, "Are you talking to me?" Journalist Thomas Friedman points out that "only one-third of the Ford F-150 engine is made in the U.S."

Throughout history, trade wars have raged between Ancient Greece and Phoenicia, Rome and Carthage, Venice and Genoa, England and the Netherlands, the U.S. and Japan. During the Great Depression, trade barriers were raised, continuing the same dynamics to the present day. Some of these conflicts were purely maritime trade rivalries, others took the form of naval battles.

Adam Smith wrote in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) that "free trade is the system that maximizes the mutual benefits of all nations," and after the 1980s, China's President Xi Jinping,

leader of the “factory of the world,” said, “Trade wars benefit no one.” Yet few listened. The first U.S. Treasury Secretary, Alexander Hamilton, insisted that “the industry of a young nation must be protected against foreign competition,” while Winston Churchill, as Britain’s Prime Minister during World War II, reminded us that “trade barriers are the economic front of wars,” showing how economic rivalries could escalate into armed conflict.

The roots of the Enlightenment are, of course, in France. Reason, revolution, and systematic critique began there; France’s cultural elite lived mostly in France, but the benefits of industrialization were reaped by England. France seemed to think while England acted. England, as the early riser, set up a constitutional monarchy in 1688 limiting the king’s powers and strengthening Parliament, while France remained under absolute monarchy and church dominance even in the 18th century.

As a recent report by the Committee to Protect Journalists in the U.S. noted, these were not normal times for American press freedom. And even leaving America aside, these were hardly normal times for the world. Democracy was drifting further away as Trump’s executive orders led the Justice Department to use subpoenas and search warrants to obtain journalists’ phone records, notes, and testimony to investigate “leaks.”

The mountains of fear were immense. Sometimes it came from detaining a single person, sometimes from the looming possibility of global war. The fear we feel while awaiting an event is greater than the event itself. There was a pervasive, silent, scentless fear that everyone could sense.

We humans know fear makes our hearts race, our breathing quicken, our palms sweat, and our pupils dilate; hormones kick in and adrenaline is released. Whether we know it or not, the fear we feel toward others increases the chance they might attack us. Yet even when facing a living creature capable of harm, we cannot entirely resist the foolishness of staring into its eyes.

Now fear had begun to live between nations. It often starts with “word wars”: politicians announce through public statements the great evils their opponents are plotting, setting a climate ripe for fear. Even in situations without immediate danger, countries unable to resolve conflicts in the absence of fear find that solutions become a kind of unattainable dream for their societies. America seemed afraid, while China appeared to stare calmly into its eyes. China’s patience was remarkable. Joseph Needham, who wrote extensively on Chinese civilization, observed, “The Chinese do not manage time; they live with it.”

Unbeknownst to us, a digital coup had swept the world. The United Nations had become like a zombie, and nearly all international organizations had lost their influence. Fear was experienced differently across nations: in Gaza, Ukraine, Syria, the Red Sea, Africa, the Panama Canal, Washington, Moscow, Beijing. This fear was not individual but collective, expectation-driven. It triggered despair, constant news-watching, distrust, narratives against enemies, and preparations for migration.

Tariff wars and tensions between China and the United States continued to escalate, and the world watched to see whether trade disputes might turn bloody over Taiwan. Elon Musk, the President's close friend, would now reportedly leave Washington, setting aside whatever electric saw had been gifted to him. Perhaps he had also realized what China's BYD could do to Tesla.

That night, in my dream, I saw the ancient Greek historian Thucydides, exiled in northern Greece for twenty years. He was obsessed with Herodotus, saying, "I must return to Athens and do something." While we were talking, someone came and said, "Athens has fallen." I interpreted that as, "Democracy has fallen." I told Thucydides, "You could have explained your trap to me first, then gone to Athens." But he was still stuck on Herodotus, replying, "They will call him the father of history, I am exiled here. Athens has fallen," and walked away. Then he turned back and shouted, "There will be a ruling power and a rising power. Like America and China. If the rising power begins to threaten the ruling power and the ruling power becomes afraid, there is a likelihood of war."

So that was the trap.

I could not fully tell whether he was speaking of fate, but the notion of a ruling power brings "pride" to mind. If a ruling power, under the weight of fear and pride, is crushed and loses the ability to think clearly, this can lead to war. For the ancient Greeks, hubris invited hostility—they understood this. Fear and pride, for a country with "organized savagery," could sequentially disable the safeguards meant to prevent war.

In his book, Thucydides references Pericles' Funeral Oration for Athenian soldiers who died in the first year of the Peloponnesian War, stating, "Our government is in the hands of the many, not the few; it is called a democracy." I laughed at how the first definition of democracy appeared in a funeral oration but wasn't surprised. Perhaps in my dream, I understood "Athens has fallen" as "Democracy has fallen."

Thucydides' trap emerges when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling power, creating a dangerous dynamic that can lead to war. At least three key speeches by President Xi Jinping reference this "Thucydides Trap" regarding potential conflict between China and the United States, suggesting that if the two countries behave sincerely toward each other, the trap can be avoided.

Flash Flash Flash…

My old friend Daniel Davies, having somehow heard what I had been through, called me from Nigeria and shouted, "Don't you know Yevgeny Alexandrovich Romanov? He's Sofia's father! He's both an ex-KGB agent and currently with the FSB. Didn't Sofia tell you that her father owns newspapers in England and estates at Hampton Court, and chateaux in Italy?"

It turned out that Sofia's father, Yevgeny Alexandrovich Romanov, had been appointed for life to the House of Lords by Boris Johnson in 2020, earning the title "Baron Romanov of Hampton

and Siberia." My old friend Daniel, yelling at me, tried to explain how incredible I was, screaming, "How are you even a journalist? This is the guy who is friends with Elton John, Mick Jagger, and Naomi Campbell!"

That night, I spent the entire night researching everything about Yevgeny Alexandrovich Romanov. I scoured Wikileaks documents and other reports. Apparently, besides the FSB, he had links with MI6 and the CIA, and without realizing it, I had been living in the fire of his daughter's—Sofia's—unbelievable love for him. I even read in a newspaper that some called him a "magician," as he had saved countless British, Russian, and American agents when they were in trouble. Sofia didn't need to tell me all of this, yet I couldn't understand why she hadn't. I was stunned—but what shocked me the most was a magazine photo of Sofia and Daniel Davies on vacation in the Seychelles. "No way!" I shouted to myself.

Yevgeny Alexandrovich Romanov

When I first saw photos of Yevgeny Alexandrovich Romanov, I thought that his presence not only filled the space but shaped the very atmosphere around him. He was nearly two meters tall, with broad shoulders, carrying himself with both military and aristocratic discipline. His hair, though graying, was thick and combed back, each strand shaped by years of experience. His eyes were ice-blue, scrutinizing every detail like a lens. His lips were often firm, yet rare smiles revealed deep warmth. High cheekbones, a defined jawline, and slightly furrowed forehead conveyed a character forged through knowledge and power.

From media reports, Romanov is more than a classic oligarch figure in today's world. He is not just wealthy; he sits at the center of a network intertwining global politics, intelligence, and business. His mansions and art collections alone draw attention, but he also wields the capacity to influence global economic balances. His estate in Hampton Court Park in London is both a symbol of luxury and a modern power hub, serving social prestige and strategic purposes alike.

Romanov's daily life is far more systematic and disciplined than that of a typical billionaire. One magazine described it: "He rises early, completes a light exercise and meditation routine, then studies global politics and financial reports in the estate's private library. He typically wears dark, classic-cut suits from English tailors. His broad shoulders and posture make even an ordinary suit appear like armor, accessorized with minimal yet expensive watches and occasionally a custom ring."

While cultivating his oligarch image, Romanov remains private and mysterious, not the typical "posing billionaire" visible in newspapers. Media can obtain only limited, mostly official information, and this mystery makes him both feared and respected. He rarely appears on social media; his presence influences people passively but effectively.

Romanov's social circle is equally selective. He maintains close relationships with political leaders, financial executives, and intelligence officials worldwide, and he is also a connoisseur of art, literature, and history. His art collection includes some of the most valuable

contemporary works, meticulously preserved. Being in the same room with him, one inevitably senses not just his power but also his cultural and intellectual depth.

For him, money is merely a tool; real power comes from knowledge, strategy, and the right network. His interest in technology gives him opportunities to understand and influence global intelligence and security systems. Facial recognition, drone fleets, and digital archives demonstrate his status as a modern oligarch.

When Romanov combines his physical presence and charisma with intellectual and strategic capacity, he becomes not just wealthy but a symbol of power in the contemporary world. People cannot act around him as ordinary humans; they must account for his presence, his past, and the influence he wields. Romanov has said about companies like OpenAI, Alphabet, Microsoft, Nvidia, and DeepSeek: “How these companies choose to wield their power and interact with governments will shape the economic, social, and political future.”

Thus, as much as my love for Sofia changed my world, so did the presence of Yevgeny Alexandrovich Romanov. He is not merely a father or a billionaire; he is the human embodiment of power, knowledge, and strategy. His physical presence—tall, piercing eyes, commanding posture—symbolizes his status and influence as an oligarch in today’s world.

The Mansion at Hampton Court

The Hampton Court Park estate, belonging to 75-year-old oligarch Yevgeny Romanov, dates back to the 18th century. Located on the grounds of Hampton Court Palace, it is classified as a Grade II historic building in England. Romanov purchased the mansion in 2007. Its gardens are featured in books about the estates of England’s wealthy. The collection includes Anselm Kiefer paintings, Marc Quinn’s *Hyper Nova* floral painting, an Antony Gormley drawing, and a large sculpture representing the artist’s body.

The more I learned about Romanov’s skills, the more astonished I became—especially realizing he maintained relationships simultaneously with MI6, FSB, and CIA. Sofia later told me that when her father first arrived in England, he said, “I’m so lucky to have come to the country of intelligence professors. I hope they accept me among them.”

The mansion has seven bedrooms, six guest rooms, three fireplaces including a dining hall, a large kitchen, numerous bathrooms and toilets, servant quarters, a wine cellar, a fitness room, and a glass-enclosed conservatory. The wine cellar contains Château Lafite Rothschild and Château Latour from Bordeaux, Domaine de la Romanée-Conti (DRC) and Domaine Leroy from Burgundy, as well as Krug Clos du Mesnil and Dom Pérignon champagnes from France.

One room serves as a cryptography hub with servers, computers, classical and modern encryption devices; another houses archives of past operational documents, maps, and identities. The estate also contains a soundproof interrogation room, and a drone fleet equipped with facial recognition maintains security.

A recent dinner event at the mansion included an extravagant menu: appetizers of Beluga caviar, spicy shrimp tartlets, duck liver mousse with truffle oil, and artichoke hearts marinated in white wine; starters of cold-smoked salmon with avocado carpaccio, fig and goat cheese arugula salad with balsamic reduction, and forest mushroom soup; main courses of saffron risotto, North Sea bass with green asparagus, red wine sauce, and salsify purée, and dry-aged filet mignon; desserts included molten dark chocolate soufflé and golden-walnut baklava. Beverages included 1961 Château Latour, cold-distilled single malt whiskey, homemade cinnamon espresso liqueur, and assorted teas.

Atlantic Collaborator

Clark Kane read an old article online to get to know Yevgeny Romanov a little better. The article, written by a Russian journalist, presented the views of Russian philosopher and thinker Aleksandr Dugin on oligarchs in general, and specifically on Yevgeny Romanov, who had been appointed for life to the House of Lords and granted the title "Baron Romanov of Hampton and Siberia."

"Aleksandr Dugin did not see the oligarch figure merely as an economic class but as a civilizational disease. In his view, the oligarch was a tumor growing on the body of Russia: externally rich, powerful, and global, yet internally empty and spiritually sold to the West. According to Dugin, these people were the 'Atlantic collaborators' who emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union—living in the heart of Russia but spiritually caught between Washington and London.

Someone like Yevgeny Romanov would fall into the 'internal enemy' category in Dugin's system of thought. For Dugin, Russia was not just a state but a metaphysical organism whose mission was to resist Western materialist civilization as a spiritual civilization, preserving the 'Eurasian civilization.' In Dugin's eyes, oligarchs weakened this resistance because they worshiped money instead of God, acting as 'Atlantic agents'—with dollars in their pockets, prayers on their lips, and a void in their hearts.

According to Dugin, the true Russian aristocracy were the heirs of the sacred empire, choosing to preserve the Russian soul rather than amass wealth like oligarchs. In Dugin's perspective, someone like Romanov was an 'anti-Russian' being, under whose Orthodox icons glimmered the tickers of stocks on Wall Street.

In his *Fourth Political Theory*, Dugin argued that the type represented by Romanov was the last exponent of liberalism. He claimed that the age of communism, fascism, and liberalism had ended and that the new era would be founded on the 'death of the economic man.' Just as aristocracy disappeared after the revolution, the new Eurasian era would see the end of oligarchs, because they were not 'existential humans' but 'economic men' cut off from God.

Had Dugin addressed someone like Yevgeny Romanov directly, he would likely have said: "Your wealth was built not with blood but with the absence of your soul. You did not grow

Russia; you grew your fortune. Your palaces are made of glass, yet the echo within them is the voice of the West. And that voice will destroy you."

In Dugin's universe, Romanov was the tragedy of modern Russia: by opening to the West, he had lost the Russian soul. The class he represented, connecting Russia to Western economic networks, colonized it from within; oligarchs were invaders not with tanks but with stock market screens.

Dugin's prescription for salvation began with detachment from 'material civilization.' For him, Russia's redemption would start with the awareness of a renewed 'sacred mission' and the extinguishing of the West's reflected false lights. The sun of Eurasia would burn not their wealth, but their shadows.

Clark Kane read the article for the third time. Dugin's words unsettled his mind: the harshness of the sentence "The oligarch is the internal enemy injecting the soul of the West into the Russian body" brought Sofia's father's face to mind—that calm, measured, calculating man with expensive ties. The portrait matched Romanov almost perfectly. Reading Dugin, Clark felt that while sitting at Sofia's family table, he was in fact a foreigner at the opposite end of a civilization.

He loved Sofia—perhaps too much. But even love could exist atop a geopolitical tension line. The types Dugin called 'Atlantic agents'—children of global finance—could discuss 'investment opportunities' every evening at Sofia's father's table over wine. Clark, with his quiet demeanor, would always be the 'other' at those tables; no matter how elegant he behaved, he would remain an outsider on the Romanovs' golden roofs.

"Perhaps," he thought, "Dugin is right; even beneath some loves, civilizations clash." He was trapped somewhere between Sofia's eyes and Dugin's words. When he loved her, was he loving her as a Western man, or was a part of his soul drifting toward Russia? Perhaps all this hesitation was his instinct to preserve his identity.

He closed the article. Dugin's voice still echoed in his mind: "The love of a soul-sold man is sterile." Clark took a deep breath. He feared that the warmth he would feel with Sofia might be overshadowed by these words. But he now knew that every time he sat at those tables, among the Romanovs' smiles, he would see Dugin's cold shadow.

My Photograph at the Senkaku Islands

Fifteen years ago, when I studied at the same university as Daniel, he first told me about the highly prized and expensive fish Thunnus orientalis, the bluefin tuna, found around the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, knowing my curiosity about seafood. He explained that this fish was one of the most valuable in Japan and worldwide, with some restaurants paying millions for it.

Daniel enthusiastically described the abundance of tuna, mackerel, anchovy, sardine, swordfish, shrimp, and squid in the remote, uninhabited waters around the Senkaku Islands.

He explained the dry-aging process for fish, where slices are exposed to controlled air to mature. He also mentioned a Japanese restaurant in Mayfair, London, called Taku, where they could eat bluefin tuna if they could afford it. There, fresh tuna imported from Spain would be dry-aged for two weeks, marinated with special soy sauce, and served as sashimi and sushi.

Eventually, Daniel persuaded me to travel with him to Japan, to Ishigaki Port near the Senkaku Islands, claiming he would book my plane ticket. At the time, I had taken leave from my newspaper job, unaware that these islands had been claimed by both China and Japan since 1971. I would see Japan without spending much, and if we had enough money, eat bluefin tuna.

In 2010, while walking around Ishigaki Port, a photo taken with Daniel and some fishermen ended up in national and international news about the islands' disputed sovereignty—except Daniel's image had been removed, leaving only mine with the fishermen. I hadn't known; I assumed it was because Daniel had started working for MI6 and didn't dwell on it.

In September 2010, the Japanese Coast Guard detained a Chinese fishing vessel near the disputed Senkaku Islands for violating Japanese waters. The captain was arrested. China retaliated by halting rare earth element shipments to Japan, sparking a major diplomatic crisis. Later, a Chinese fishing vessel collided with two Japanese Coast Guard ships in the East China Sea, and newspapers reported the worsening dispute over rare earth elements.

What were these rare earth elements?

Vysetti Balaram's 2023 *Mineral Journal* article, "Potential Future Alternative Sources for Rare Earth Elements: Opportunities and Challenges," described rising industrial demand. I didn't know then that even a single iPhone contains eight rare earth elements, most controlled by China. Wind turbines, lasers, electric cars, MRI machines, and guided missiles all rely on these elements. Demand was expected to nearly double by 2030, and countries needed reliable supply chains. The U.S. imported 80% of its rare earths from China, making the supply chain vulnerable.

According to Kalantzakos in *Oxford Academic* (Jan 25, 2018), the 2010 China-Japan geopolitical tension cast a dark shadow on the seventeen rare earth elements overnight. Their critical role in high-tech production made these deposits strategically vital for the U.S., China, and the EU. A 2025 agreement between the U.S. and Ukraine also pertained to this issue.

Radosław Bielawski noted in *Environmental Engineering* (May 2020) that China imposed export controls on certain rare earths and nearly halted the export of germanium, essential for night vision and infrared systems. The defense industry was dependent on these materials; without them, European weapons production would be impossible.

After learning all this, I found another source showing Sofia's father's 115-meter ultra-luxury yacht, *White Nights*, including its features. Perhaps in 2010, while we were near the Senkaku Islands, the yacht was somewhere nearby. Its aft deck had a private helipad, anti-drone radars,

satellite connections, Italian marble and Zebrano wood paneling, a 16-person glass dining table under a Murano crystal chandelier, and a server room called “CryptoVault” connected to an offshore data center. I had no way of knowing if it had been there then.

Sofia’s father, Yevgeny Alexandrovich Romanov, titled “Baron Romanov of Hampton and Siberia,” likely listened to Rachmaninoff’s Second Piano Concerto on *White Nights*, aware that the composer’s hand spanned thirteen piano keys—the largest in classical music history. In my mind, the opening notes with their minor chords evoked church bells, dedicated to neurologist Nicholas Dahl, who had helped Rachmaninoff recover from depression.

In my imagination, Romanov, using his MI6-linked satellite phone, reported: “Calling from the Senkaku Islands. A Chinese fishing vessel near the East China Sea islands collided with two Japanese Coast Guard ships 40 minutes apart. Tensions are rising.” In reality, he might have been at his mansion, dealing with a leaked report classifying China as an enemy class according to Russian intelligence documents.

Disappointment

I had gone with Daniel to the Senkaku Islands without knowing that we weren’t there just to travel and eat bluefin tuna. Daniel, who worked for MI6, had a job monitoring what was happening there. Like a fool, I hadn’t even realized that his silhouette had been removed from the photo we took with fishermen and that the edited version had been published in newspapers. It was quite possible that Sofia, like Daniel, thought I was an MI6 operative and that was why she had taken an interest in me. Even her suggestion that we write a novel together might have been a way of keeping me under observation.

She had told me her father was an oligarch, and again, like a fool, I never asked her any questions about it afterward. If I had asked why she never mentioned the mansions, the yachts, or the château in Italy, she would probably have said, “I told you my father was an oligarch.” I had seen only Sofia, heard only what she told me, and never once questioned what lay behind her, never made the effort to learn. With my ridiculous Superman imitation name, Clark Kane, I was nothing but an idiot.

Lying in a fetal position and sleeping for months, going to my mother in India, hiding in the backyards of colleges, locking myself in a library for life—many coping strategies crossed my mind, yet none of them felt right. Beating Daniel Davies senseless and getting arrested was also among these thoughts. I knew I had the strength to do it, but I gave it up, wondering what I would say to Sofia after waiting for him to return from Nigeria and carrying it out. No matter what I thought, my mind always circled back to Sofia, and I couldn’t shake the feeling that she would be my downfall. If she left me and never spoke to me again, there was nothing I could do anyway.

Years ago, when I went to visit my mother, my father had sent me off to India saying, “I hope you don’t get sick there.” Although I felt close to Indian culture because of my mother, after two weeks the poverty and desperation I saw began to make me feel miserable myself. These

feelings intensified when my mother took me to the Ganges, to the place where cremations were performed. The smell of burning human flesh mixed with incense, smoke, ash, and the odor of decay from the river reached its peak, and when I heard the crackling sound of human flesh burning, I ran away from my mother as fast as I could. She called after me, “What’s the problem? Just as a person leaves old clothes behind and puts on new ones, the soul leaves the old body and enters a new one.”

What my mother did not understand was that someone like me, caught between Anglo-Saxon and Indian culture, could not enter a new body—my soul would remain suspended, left out in the open. Perhaps their souls found new bodies, but mine remained exposed. That day, I realized once again that despite the world’s many cultures, humanity shared a common point: helplessness in the face of death.

In England, the sky was gray and a light rain was falling. For some reason, I went and sat on a bench by the River Cam. In the silence of the night, watching the flowing water, I tried to understand how my thoughts were drifting. It felt as if somewhere in my mind Tchaikovsky’s *Pathetique*, his Sixth Symphony, was playing. By not paying enough attention to my surroundings, I had reduced myself to a pitiful state. The symphony, his final work, premiered just nine days before his death, almost like a farewell—a reflection of his inner reckoning. In an article I had once written, I had even described it as a “suicide document.”

Under the influence of Tchaikovsky’s notes, I called Sofia several times. When she didn’t answer despite the phone ringing for a long time, I suddenly stood up, stepped closer to the river, and shouted at myself, “Pathetic fool!” I truly was in a miserable state. If Sofia wanted, she could make me write anything for one of her father’s newspapers, manipulate me, even put a leash around my neck and make me follow her like a dog.

Eleanor Davies

My name is Eleanor Davies. I was born in one of the coastal towns of Wales, and much of my childhood was spent watching the gray waves of the Atlantic. My father was a sailor, my mother a history teacher. From them, I developed a love for both adventure and the stories of the past at an early age. I am tall, with broad shoulders, and I always stand upright—this is the posture of a sailor my father taught me. My hair is dark chestnut, my eyes deep and green like the sea. People often say I look as though I’m “lost among the waves,” but I attribute that simply to my observational nature and my thoughts.

As a child, everyone at school had a different name for me. Because I was so absorbed in books, my teachers called me “Little Academic,” while my friends sometimes called me “Green Eyes.” I could spend hours reading alone, getting lost among old maps and ship logs. I loved my mother’s warm bread with lightly salted butter and fresh strawberry jam.

During my high school years, my interest in history and politics led me to work in small museums in Wales. While examining old documents, I learned how time flows and how human

decisions shape both individual lives and entire societies. This curiosity pushed me toward academic research and helped me understand human psychology and motivation.

My working style is disciplined yet creative. On my desk, there are always a few notebooks, colored pens, and a map. When I think over maps, I construct probabilities, connections, and cause-effect relationships in my mind. I sip my coffee slowly, take deep breaths, and settle my thoughts into a quiet rhythm. This silence often becomes the ground where new ideas emerge.

My main interests include understanding human behavior and unraveling interactions within complex systems. For this, I study historical events while also following modern research in psychology and sociology. Books, manuscripts, archival documents, and sometimes street observations all converge into a single body of knowledge.

In my current life, I combine my research and observations to produce academic articles, reports, and projects. Yet inside me there is always a thirst for adventure—as if the next great discovery lies hidden beyond the seas waiting for me. I am someone who thinks deeply, yet on the surface is always searching for a path beyond the waves.

"History is more the product of chaos than of conspiracy"
Zbigniew Brzezinski

March 2025, University of Cambridge, England

At the University of Cambridge, you can see Gothic architectural details with fine stonework and stained-glass windows in high-ceilinged vaulted structures; Tudor-style red-brick façades with arched windows; Baroque-influenced buildings; Victorian-era examples; as well as modern and contemporary architecture made with glass, steel, and concrete. Trinity College hosted Sir Isaac Newton in the past and Stephen Hawking in his wheelchair; Christ's College saw Charles Darwin at work; King's College had Alan Turing; and James Watson lectured in his laboratories.

It was a cool Cambridge morning, with grass and plane, oak, and horse chestnut trees washed by rain, occasionally shrouded in mist. That morning, two workers from the Cleaning and Maintenance Team began preparing an office on the second floor of one of the historic buildings used by the Department of Politics and International Studies.

The university library was rich with archival sources covering centuries of China–UK relations. Digitalized and online archives of the British Foreign Office documents on China were also available. Early studies and materials on China's earliest trade and political relations, many of which are also available online, were held at the British Library. As the two cleaning staff prepared the room, they chatted:

"How's the weather?"

“Better.”

“Why are we setting this up?”

“I think they’re going to write a report.”

“For whom?”

“How should I know?”

“Right. Do I know why Russian oligarchs buy our football clubs? The other day I asked a professor in the other building who deals with football. ‘It’s mostly about the money,’ he said.”

“That’s what I call a scientific answer. Didn’t he mention dirty money?”

“Let’s just focus on our work. Three desks, three computers, one printer, three kettles, one projector. The three bookshelves they want are already in the room.”

“Leave the photos of Keynes and David Held?”

“Yes, leave them.”

“If we do a thorough cleaning, we can finish by noon.”

“A bit slow, but meticulous.”

“Who’s the report for, anyway?”

“No idea.”

“Hope it’s not MI6. They say the end of an economic crisis is war.”

“Where do you hear these things?”

“Friends tell me.”

“Those kinds of friends…”

“What’s wrong with that? They’re talking scientifically. Alfred beat his wife up and sent her to the hospital the other day.”

“Truly scientific behavior. Shouldn’t have married.”

“It’s fate, what can you do…”

“Wipe the windows thoroughly.”

“Will do. They say views on the world economy come from here; if only they’d fix ours a bit…”

“Who cares about us?”

By noon, the two workers finished setting up the office. The younger of the two, who had asked about Russian oligarchs buying football clubs, saluted Keynes' photo like a soldier and jokingly asked as he left:

"How's work on the other side, my lord?"

A few days earlier, the UK Government had requested the Department of Politics and International Studies to prepare a report on the trade crisis developing mainly between the US and China. The department assigned the experts Eleanor Davies, a Brit, and David Rosenberg, of American origin, to the task. Then, the department head contacted the Future of Humanity Institute to recommend an AI specialist for the project; they suggested Vikram Patel, an Indian expert.

Eleanor Davies was quintessentially an English academic. With silk scarves around her neck, afternoon teas, barber-fresh blonde hair, slim build, and perfectly dust-free suits, she had always been one of the department's most diligent. The previous year, she had divorced her engineer husband who worked with rare minerals. Her 30-something son, Daniel, was not yet married and worked in MI6's China section. At the time, the UK was heavily engaged in Africa—especially Nigeria, South Africa, Ghana, Ethiopia, and Morocco—working on economic cooperation and energy projects with these countries.

According to Daniel, Africa resembled George Orwell's depiction of Oceania, Eurasia, and East Asia in *1984*, a contested zone of endless war. In 2025, Africa was an arena of constant friction between the CIA, MI6, and China's Ministry of State Security (MSS). Nigeria was becoming one of Africa's largest digital economies; Chinese firms had made significant progress in infrastructure investment and digital payment systems. While China considered Nigeria under its Belt and Road initiatives, the UK aimed to enter Nigeria's fintech ecosystem as an investor.

Eleanor was astonished by Daniel's accounts of MI6 and MSS collaboration regarding a terrorist group in Nigeria and listened, wide-eyed, to his explanations about who was pursuing what in Nigeria's Ministry of Petroleum Resources, overseeing oil and gas reserves, licensing, and international energy agreements.

Eleanor's close friends would discuss their father and grandfather's connections to the Royal Court, their wealth grown through investment tips from the Palace, and they valued their friendship with Eleanor. Her parents had divorced in middle age, and a palace employee had spread the rumor as to why. Eleanor's mother had fallen into depression and lived in a care home, cut off from the outside world. Eleanor visited her mother a few times a year. On her last visit, she recounted in detail how she had divorced her husband and suspected he had cheated on her just as her father had cheated on her mother.

When her mother asked, "Did your husband cheat on you with someone from the Palace too?" she replied earnestly, "No, ours wasn't from the Palace. My husband pursued an older Chinese woman."

After returning from an important operation in China, Daniel had stayed with her for two nights, brought a diamond ring, and they spent the evenings drinking and talking. Daniel explained that China's Belt and Road project was advancing rapidly in Africa and worldwide. They laughed together at Chinese references to Donald Trump as the "Eternal Lord of Tariffs." Daniel told his mother, "Those yellow-faced people we made suffer with our opium—they'll get even. China's been here 5,000 years. Most of the time the US wasn't around, and we survived."

That night, Daniel warned his mother to be careful and mentioned a news article about a Norwegian man in Finsbury Park, London, who earned his living by cutting body parts from living people and streaming it to 20,000 paying subscribers. He appeared to live a quiet life in a Victorian detached house, but had converted the room under the stairs into a butcher shop.

"20,000 paying subscribers watch a butcher cut people alive?" Eleanor asked in shock. Daniel replied, "Evil has no end, mother. I recently watched Guillermo del Toro's *Hellboy*, where the blonde girl says, 'Hell will not surprise us.' So many people live in the world expecting hell won't surprise them…"

Increasingly alienated from today's world, Eleanor often told her students that she didn't much like William Blake's 1794 poem *London*, yet still quoted it, saying, "I advise you not to wear the shackles that reason imposes." She also wasn't particularly fond of Nobel laureate Amartya Sen's ideas on development and democracy or Joseph Stiglitz's view that international trade needed ethical evaluation.

For Eleanor Davies, the Opium Wars of 1839–1842 and 1856–1860 were about control of global trade. England naturally sought more trade ports and higher tariffs to maintain opium exports to China, aiming to extend free trade and expand its influence in Asia.

That evening, a paragraph in a book caught Eleanor's attention:

"China rediscovered naval power after the Opium War. In Wei Yuan's *Illustrated Treatise on the Maritime Kingdoms*, written long before American Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan, this was described. Unfortunately, the work was left forgotten for decades. By the end of the Qing Dynasty, when Mahan's naval power theory emerged, the Chinese rediscovered it a third time, yet its social impact remained limited. This odd 'discover-forget-rediscover-forget' cycle of Chinese naval doctrine reflected a historical dysfunction in China's maritime orientation. Modern historians of China can easily fall into this strange cycle if they fail to trace its origins."[1]

Eleanor immediately noted in her notebook: *discover-forget-rediscover-forget*—she realized it was the first time she had encountered the term "maritime orientation dysfunction" in reference to China. Mahan, at the end of the 19th century, had summed up the axis of the world in one sentence: "Who rules the seas rules the world." At the time, it was true—

[1] Yang Guozhen, Compass on the Ocean: Chinese Maritime Theory, History and Culture, Springer, 2024, s. 125.

commerce flowed through the oceans. Power flowed through naval bases, coaling stations, and fleets. The sea was the operating system of the first version of globalization.

But now—a Maglev train gliding over the magnetic field could silently vibrate Mahan's tombstone; land, once heavy, friction-laden, and slow, could be faster, more direct, and cheaper than the sea, overturning classical geopolitics. A 10,000-kilometer line from Beijing to Hamburg… at 1,000 km/h, it would take under ten hours; a container that used to take 30 days could be delivered in one.

Eleanor continued reading:

"Past dynasties neglected the sea, especially since the Ming Dynasty issued strict sea bans. Maritime activity was seen as 'collaboration with foreign nations,' emigration as 'treason.' Excessive time abroad was labeled 'traitorous' or 'abandoned.' After Zheng He's voyages to the Western seas, official maritime activity was deemed useless for the State and abolished. Archives of Zheng He's maritime exploits were burned to prevent future emperors from exploring the sea. The societal practice of maritime civilization was rejected, becoming peripheral circulation. This political backdrop caused the loss of much maritime historical material and further entrenched the dysfunction in China's maritime orientation."[2]

After staying two nights with Eleanor, Daniel returned home, saying:

"The world is shaking, mother. The Americans who mocked us for 'the sun never sets on their empire' seem to be reaching the end of their global dominance. America was once a leading sprinter, but now the terrain has changed. The race isn't about who runs fastest anymore—it's about who builds the road. Geoffrey Hinton, the godfather of AI, says this. China understands that AI's future doesn't depend solely on resources, data, computing, and energy. This insight has shifted the balance of power. You should see the ports the Chinese are building in Africa."

Vikram Patel

I am Vikram Patel. I was born in Mumbai, India, growing up amidst crowded streets, the scent of the sea, and a constantly moving life. I am slightly below average height but athletic; years of running and practicing yoga have given me flexibility and endurance. My black hair is usually cut short and slightly wavy; my eyes are dark brown, carrying a careful and observant gaze. My face usually wears a calm expression, but when I start speaking, my eyes light up with energy, and I show my interest in people with small gestures as I listen.

My childhood was spent with books and music. My father was a history professor, and my mother a literature teacher; my curiosity about health and human life began early under their influence. Classical Indian cuisine has always been my favorite. I especially love sweets made with fresh, spiced coconut. Sometimes, I experiment alone in the kitchen, blending different spices to create new flavors. I never start my day without tea.

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[2] Yang Guozhen, Compass on the Ocean: Chinese Maritime Theory, History and Culture, Springer, 2024, s. 121.

In school, my friends called me “Vik”; a short, friendly, and reassuring name. I remained quiet in class, took notes on my observations, and asked deep questions during discussions. My teachers sometimes noticed my silent curiosity, and sometimes were surprised when my questions went unanswered. During university, I was interested in both mathematics and social sciences. Computer science particularly fascinated me. Understanding human behavior and social structures became a passion.

My working style is organized but flexible. Many research files and notes are open on my computer screen, and a few books are stacked on my desk. I process analytical data with digital tools as much as possible, but sometimes I realize that scribbling ideas on paper sparks creative breakthroughs. When I write, I usually listen to classical Indian music or soft jazz.

For me, learning and observation are a way of life. Talking to people, hearing their stories, and understanding different perspectives excites me. Observing social interactions sometimes provides insights more valuable than lab experiments. Staying silent is necessary for deep thought, but I do not hesitate to share my ideas when needed.

Currently, my life revolves around academic work, social health projects, and international collaborations. Yet, the curiosity and desire to understand the world remain inside me. Every new project, discussion, and analysis reminds me how complex and fascinating life is. I am Vikram Patel: calm, observant, curious, and devoted to understanding people.

On the Way to the Meeting

Vikram Patel was walking to the first meeting of the three-person committee in the Politics and International Studies building, where he would meet Eleanor Davies and David Rosenberg for the first time. As he walked, he reflected on the experiences of the famous Indian mathematician Ramanujan, who had once studied at this university. In 1914, Srinivasa Ramanujan arrived at Trinity College, Cambridge, invited by mathematician G.H. Hardy. He produced highly productive scientific work but struggled in England due to adapting to the climate, forming personal bonds with colleagues, and health issues.

Patel’s father, a professor of the history of sects in Kerala, India, had written a book translated into English titled *Symbols in Confucian Philosophy* and continued to work in Kerala, where Vikram spent his childhood and youth. In his late twenties, Vikram came to the UK. He gained recognition for a paper he wrote during his master’s titled *The Network Dynamics of Religious Expansion: A Case Study on Scientology*, and later joined the Institute for the Future of Humanity to work on data-driven research.

In his late thirties, Vikram met his future wife, sociologist Nalini Kapoor, at a U.S. conference. They married two years later and began living in England. Nalini was very thin; her floor-length skirt often hid her feet as she walked. Describing her to a friend, Vikram said, “She has a strange walk, like Michael Jackson’s moonwalk, as if her feet never touch the ground.”

Nalini, on the other hand, compared Vikram to Freddie Mercury because of his protruding front teeth. When she realized he didn't like the comparison, she never mentioned it again. Their shared research on sects was a common point between them. At the time, Nalini was studying how sects spread within a society. She also had a literary side, with stories published in *The New Yorker*. When her husband mentioned writing a report on trade wars, she told him, "Remember, the U.S. glorified consumption, China production."

When Vikram first met Nalini, he read some of her papers, including *Selective Resistance: The Amish Approach to Technology and Modernity*, exploring how technological limits shape social cohesion and cultural identity; *Slow Technology in a Fast World: Discussing Progress in Amish Communities*, a sociological analysis of how the Amish reconcile traditional values with innovation pressures; and *Technology, Autonomy, and Moral Choice among the Amish*, examining ethical frameworks guiding technology acceptance and rejection. Particularly, he repeatedly read the abstract of her paper *Cultural Contagion and Ideological Networks under Authoritarian Regimes*:

"This study examines how marginal ideological movements, especially unrecognized spiritual sects, gain strength within authoritarian regimes, focusing on contemporary China. Using network theory and models of cultural diffusion, we analyze how such movements establish resilient underground networks, circumventing state surveillance and censorship."

David Rosenberg

I am David Rosenberg. I was born and raised among the stone streets of New York; the concrete, crowds, and constant motion of the city taught me about the real world. I am slightly above average height. My physique comes from basketball and long walks in my youth. My hair is chestnut and usually messy. My dark brown eyes sometimes carry a thoughtful gaze that intrigues people. I often wear a serious expression, but those who know me recognize a hidden humor in my smile.

As a child, my nickname at school was "Roni." I often lost myself in my family's bookshelves and spent hours in libraries. My father was an engineer, my mother a music teacher, a combination that taught me analytical thinking and artistic sensibility. I loved spending time in the kitchen, especially enjoying my mother's baked salmon and fresh herb salads. Coffee and chocolate were indispensable small pleasures. Sometimes I would sit alone, taking extensive research notes with a cup of coffee.

University years were spent oscillating between mathematics and philosophy. Understanding the human mind, exploring the potential of algorithms, and discussing these within an ethical framework excited me. My interest in both technology and human thought earned me the nickname "Professor" among friends. I often engaged in debates, asked questions in seminars, and occasionally challenged my instructors.

For me, learning and observation are a way of life. Every day, I must learn something to understand the world more deeply. I observe both people and cultures in the field while

consulting academic sources. I enjoy solitude, yet exchanging ideas and debating energizes me.

Currently, I am engaged in academic research, consulting projects, and writing technology-focused articles and books. Yet the curiosity and imagination of my youth remain; solving a problem or discovering a new idea is among life's greatest thrills. I am David Rosenberg: analytical, curious, and striving to understand the world through both reason and intuition.

David Rosenberg and China

David Rosenberg, 55, was a long-nosed, tall man with brown hair, brown eyes, a slight belly, partially bald, wearing glasses, and never without an umbrella due to constant rain. He had been working for two years at the Politics and International Studies Department at Cambridge. His grandfather, a physicist, had emigrated from Austria to America before World War II, a Jewish man.

Eleanor had been working in the same department with David, a renowned behavioral economist. Though David disliked Eleanor's classical approaches in scientific debates, he often described her as having classic English elegance: "I've never seen a woman who suits tea so well," he would say. Eleanor would tease him, "You see the world behaviorally, sir. But if we explain the world through people acting according to their own inclinations, where does science come in? How can we generalize such behaviors?"

David indeed had a unique perspective on the world. Eleanor's immersion in classical palace stories made him appreciate this. Recently, David had told her about a slime mold—an uncategorized organism—living in dark, damp forest corners. The mold, once thought to be a fungus, could make decisions and find the shortest paths without a brain. Eleanor asked, "So we don't need algorithms to determine the shortest subway paths?" David replied, "Almost like that."

Eleanor pondered for a couple of days, asking, "What does slime mold have to do with economics?" David replied, "Even without a brain, it makes decisions. I'm thinking of writing a paper called *The Rationality of Brainless Decisions*," then laughed, adding, "Just kidding, of course."

David had never married and had dedicated his life to studying China's economy and history. Eleanor played a significant role in bringing him to Cambridge in his fifties. They had long collaborated on China-related studies. A week ago, Eleanor called one night, saying, "David, we're going on a long journey. A report on China is requested from us. A room will be prepared on the second floor, and apparently, an Indian named Vikram Patel from the Institute for the Future of Humanity will join us."

He liked Eleanor, knew her family had close ties with the British royal family, and that her son worked for MI6. David reread the last paragraph of the book he held:

"We will attempt to recount events spanning vast territories and long periods. Our task is difficult, with fact and fiction intertwined. These events involve human ambition, greed, laziness, diligence, virtue, honesty, deceit, courage, and fear. We will discuss what happened among them, but rest assured, even if some events are fictional, they are not impossible."

This paragraph about "events spanning vast territories and long periods" matched what Eleanor had told him on the phone: "For the current trade war, we are asked to evaluate the U.S. and China as primary actors."

David continued reading:

"Let us begin with the story of one of the Eight Immortals of the Taoist tradition, also known as Iron-Cane Li. The story begins with Li's death and the departure of his spirit from his body on a celestial journey. Li asked his disciple to protect his body for seven days, but on the sixth day, his disciple, unable to endure further, burned the body due to his mother's illness. Li returned without considering that his teacher's spirit would be exposed. Finding his body gone, Li had to inhabit the body of a nearby crippled beggar. People saw him as unkempt, ugly, old, angry, and grumpy, yet he helped the poor and healed the sick, carrying true virtue, wisdom, and compassion within. His reality was natural balance, simplicity, and inner peace."

Indeed, during the so-called "Century of Humiliation" in the 19th century, the spirits of the Chinese had metaphorically left their bodies, wandering in search of opium when no bodies could be found. China was fascinating. They invented gunpowder, paper, the printing press, and the compass; built arguably the largest fleet, palace, and encyclopedia; endured the Century of Humiliation through opium use; survived famine and even cannibalism; and became a country capable of mass, low-cost technological production.

Understanding the importance of scale, the Ming Emperor Chengzu (personal name Zhu Di, reign 1360–1424) undertook grand projects. Modern China planned vast solar arrays capable of collecting more energy in a year than all the world's oil.

America, once supreme, began fearing China. Europe evaluated this development under Henry Kissinger's maxim: "It is dangerous to be an enemy of America, but fatal to be its friend."

David's mind drifted to Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor*, imagining the grandeur of the Forbidden City: 8,600 rooms, 10-meter-high walls, surrounded by a moat 52 meters wide, with only four gates. It was impossible to enter unnoticed. The city, constructed largely of Phoebe zhennan wood from southwest China, used joinery without nails. Painted mainly red (good fortune) and yellow (imperial power), it featured dragons, phoenixes, and lions, reflecting the significance of buildings. The Hall of Supreme Harmony had nine animals; the Palace of Earthly Tranquility had seven.

China was ancient and astonishingly modern. Francis Bacon in *Novum Organum* (1620) remarked that no empire, religion, or star exerted as much influence as China's mechanical discoveries: gunpowder, printing, and compass. By the 4th century BCE, Chinese had

discovered naturally magnetized lodestone, used in divination, later adapted as compasses. David thought China's long-standing engagement with magnetism culminated in maglev trains, hovering above tracks using magnetic repulsion.

Chinese cosmology, dating from 475 BCE, held that celestial bodies were egg-shaped, Earth was surrounded by outer space like egg yolk, and heavens rotated like wheels. Tang dynasty (618–907) coin shortages and trade burdens led to the Song dynasty (960–1279) introducing paper money. Ibn Battuta noted that Chinese shipbuilding peaked at least a century before Admiral Zheng He's voyages.

China was extraordinary, attracting adventurers and risk-takers. Combining resources and managing risk traced back to medieval guilds. 16th-century English merchants formed companies to trade at great distances, with enormous risks mitigated by stockholding and state support.

David often explained U.S.-China collaboration in AI: in 2015 at Redwood Hotel's legendary dinner for OpenAI's founding, attendees included Sam Altman, Elon Musk, Greg Brockman, Ilya Sutskever, Reid Hoffman, Peter Thiel, and Dario Amodei, then working at Baidu's Silicon Valley AI lab. The U.S. trained the Chinese not just in manufacturing Apple phones but in AI itself.

Zbigniew Brzezinski warned in 2017 that the most dangerous scenario was a China-Russia coalition. The U.S. tried to prevent this by drawing China toward itself but miscalculated, potentially creating its own monster.

Chinese and American researchers have long shared AI knowledge. For example, Microsoft Research Asia's Chinese team developed ResNet, winning ImageNet 2015; ResNet later became a component of AlphaFold, predicting protein structures.

David, known for his interdisciplinary approach, wrote *Beyond Boundaries: An Interdisciplinary Economic Theory*, tracing maritime trade from Bartolomeu Dias in 1488 to Vasco da Gama in 1498, and noting the first Englishman in India, Thomas Stephens, in 1579. His earlier book, *Dragon and Eagle: The Political Economy of Global Power Struggles*, led to *Code, Steel, and Chip: The New Frontier of Trade*, highlighting technology, production, and data conflicts. David observed a shift from globalization to bloc formation: the world moved from a "global village" to systems of countries with shared interests forming their own blocs.

Although proud of his books, a recent film unsettled him: a Nobel laureate returning to his South American hometown tore a page from his book for toilet paper when the car broke down. Ignorance transforms knowledge into waste. Eleanor told him of a Norwegian man in Finsbury Park streaming live body parts of humans to 20,000 subscribers. "Can you believe it, David? 20,000 subscribers! I no longer understand this world!"

David lived alone; such stories frightened him. Stories never end. Americans viewed China's Xi Jinping as the "chief storyteller," but the British had set the precedent by founding the East

India Company, whose modern corporate descendant influenced today's global corporations. The East India Company, founded 31 December 1600 under Queen Elizabeth I, held monopolies over all overseas trade in the East Indies. The first English ship arrived in China in 1626.

The Company, though often malevolent, fostered libraries, museums, botanical gardens, and experimental data practices, perhaps sparking a second scientific revolution. Its contributions to logistics and accounting were significant. In 1790, the Company lost to Tipu Sultan in South India, leaving valuable manuscripts behind. These preserved works included Sultan Tipu's personal writings and favorite books, such as a copy of the Quran and his dream journal.

The Company's influence extended to economists like Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and John Stuart Mill. While some argued monopolies were necessary for costly infrastructure enabling long-distance trade, free-trade advocates opposed this. Smith wrote in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), "Thus the monopoly of the East India Company is a clear violation of natural liberty," adding, "The government of a private trading company may be the worst possible government for any country."

Behavioral economics, which David supported, began in the 1940s with Herbert Simon's assertion of humans' limited information-processing capacity. Institutionalization followed Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky's 1979 *Prospect Theory*, showing how humans make systematic errors under risk.

Humans systematically erred when buying and selling. The Chinese had likely used opium since the 8th century for medicinal and perceived aphrodisiac purposes. The British sold it via wooden pipes resembling tobacco pipes. French and Dutch traders dealt in opium with China long before the East India Company monopolized it. By the late 17th century, recreational opium use became significant. The Opium Wars were the British forcing a dangerous drug on China for profit. Chinese officials often benefited personally from illegal trade, ignoring imperial bans.

The Imperial Palace in Beijing was concerned about opium and issued a ban in 1729, though small medicinal amounts were still allowed. Anyone caught illegally trading faced harsh punishments like 100 bamboo strikes or wearing heavy wooden collars, much to the displeasure of the East India Company's top executives, as it threatened trade with China.

"The transformation of the dragon into a human,
the transformation of the emperor into a citizen."

Film Director Bernardo Bertolucci
(for *The Last Emperor*)

Contemporary Chinese Film Director Liang Weihao

I am Liang Weihao. I grew up in the damp, gray streets of Shanghai; once, on my way to school, rainwater mixed with mud flowed beneath my feet, and the scent of it still lingers in my memory. My mother and father always surrounded me with books. My father was a poet, and the walls of our home were filled with his verses. At night, I would retreat to my room and quietly read his poems, sometimes closing my eyes, trying to feel the weight of the words.

As a child, I was thin and bony. My shoulders were narrow, my hands long, and my fingers always ready to write, draw, or grasp something. My face was a little pale, my hair usually messy and black, and my eyes always carried a distant look. At school, they often called me "Little Philosopher"; this was because I wandered in my own world during breaks. Some of my teachers responded impatiently to this, but others tried to understand, giving me extra assignments on Chinese history or ancient philosophers.

When it came to food, my favorite childhood flavors were the lightly spiced noodles my mother made and sweet rice desserts filled with lotus roots. While my friends usually wanted pastries or fried chicken, I would quietly eat my noodles, slowly chewing the sweet lotus roots. They reminded me of the past, my family, and the streets of Shanghai.

My school nickname was mostly given by my friends: "Shadow of the Qilin." As a child, I didn't understand it; I just laughed it off. Later, I learned that the Qilin, resembling a giraffe, was a sacred and rare creature in Chinese mythology, heralding the birth of wise people. I had received this nickname because I was a quiet, observant child who rarely appeared in the spotlight. My friends saw this silent, watchful nature of mine perhaps as a sign that I would one day interpret the world as a director.

Even before entering university, a video I made about the *Yongle Dadian* (Encyclopedia of Emperor Yongle)—compiled between 1403–1408 by over 2,000 scholars, spanning approximately 11,095 volumes and 22,877 chapters, though most original manuscripts have since been lost, leaving only about 400 volumes today—had attracted significant attention.

During my university years, the idea of making a film called *Admiral of the Seven Seas* began to shadow my mind. The film would blend history, politics, and mythology: the seven maritime expeditions of Emperor Yongle, the life of Zheng He, and historical bridges stretching from Bukhara to China. But I was conflicted about the title. *Admiral of the Seven Seas* felt profound,

historical, and epic; it would remind the audience of Zheng He's admirality, the scale of his voyages, and their historical significance. Yet, it also felt somewhat cold, perhaps too ordinary.

I was constantly studying things. The eunuchs' initial role was to attend to women in the harem, but unlike the women, they could also serve as imperial agents outside palace walls. Although a series of rules limited the number and functions of eunuchs, these restrictions quickly disappeared, and by 1384 the first institutions employing eunuchs were well established: the first was the Court Ceremonials, responsible for inspecting all documents produced by the imperial bureaucracy and requiring the emperor's signature. On the same date, the Directorate of Palace Servants was established to oversee all construction and repairs in the imperial residence.

Meanwhile, the title I had in mind for my film, *The Eunuch and the Giraffe*, was more playful, intriguing, and symbolic. The title used Zheng He's eunuch status and the giraffe he brought from Africa as metaphors, representing the foreign, the other, and the different. When people heard the title, they were first surprised, then curious, perhaps smiling while trying to grasp the plot. Yet sometimes the title felt too light or unusual; I worried it didn't fully reflect the serious historical and political depth of my film.

Sometimes, when I sat alone thinking, scenes ran through my mind: the streets of Bukhara, Marco Polo's steps, libraries and mosques destroyed after the Mongol invasion… Then Zheng He's massive ships, seagulls mixing with the sky as they crossed oceans, diplomatic and trade routes opening across the seven seas… As I imagined these scenes, I believed the title *Admiral of the Seven Seas* would fully reflect this epic narrative. Yet, among these scenes were elements that amused or intrigued: the giraffe, exotic and strange, a captivating element drawing people into the story. Hence, *The Eunuch and the Giraffe* lingered in my mind.

My friends and colleagues had different opinions. One said, "*Admiral of the Seven Seas* gives historical seriousness but may not attract festival audiences"; another said, "*The Eunuch and the Giraffe* sparks conversation on social media; people will be curious. But it could dilute historical depth." These debates only added to my confusion. Both titles represented different aspects of my film, but I could not decide which should dominate.

At night, lying in bed, I imagined how both titles would resonate in the scenes. I would think *Admiral of the Seven Seas*; the scenes could be epic, historical, and serious. Then *The Eunuch and the Giraffe*; the giraffe's stretched neck became a metaphor between laughter and surprise. Sometimes I wanted to step away from this thought, but every morning the titles reunited with different scenes in my mind.

Sometimes I tried to find a middle path: let it be *The Eunuch and the Giraffe* at festivals but *Admiral of the Seven Seas* for national screenings. In the end, moving between these two titles, like my silent childhood observations, would mature over time, and perhaps the film itself would guide me in my decision. For now, the only certainty was that both titles reminded me of my dream-filled childhood in the gray streets of Shanghai.

Five years had passed since graduating from the Shanghai Film Academy. Since my first year, my greatest dream had been to make the film *Admiral of the Seven Seas*. Like his father, Bertolucci was a poet, and in his youth, living in the same house as Pier Paolo Pasolini, he had read his poems aloud. Watching Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor* turned this project into a passion; I began to see the film in my dreams at night.

The Last Emperor was the first Western film allowed to shoot in Beijing's Forbidden City. Although it beautifully portrayed the loneliness of China's last emperor, Pu Yi, and the grandeur of the Forbidden City, to me, it was politically shallow. Technically almost flawless, the film did not sufficiently cover the Opium Wars.

In my research for my film, I read that at the beginning of the 15th century, Xia Yuanji, head of the civil bureaucracy and Minister of Finance, labeled Zheng He's fleet a "waste of national resources." The Confucian bureaucracy opposing eunuchs argued, "The state treasury is consumed by these extravagant and costly sea voyages," and obstructed Zheng He. At the end of the 15th century, a high-ranking bureaucrat, Liu Daxia, advocated destroying Zheng He's voyage records, claiming, "Preserving these books would lead youth into false dreams and extravagant ambitions." Eventually, the Chinese bureaucracy wanted to erase all records related to the Admiral of the Seven Seas.

This was critical. Confucian bureaucrats also viewed exotic imports like giraffes, zebras, peacocks, fragrant trees, and perfumes as trivial palace amusements. They saw the voyages, led by a foreign-born eunuch and a Muslim, as an insult to the diligent, exam-tested scholars.

The fierce rivalry between Confucian bureaucrats and palace eunuchs peaked as the latter gained influence over state affairs. Furthermore, Confucian scholars viewed Chinese and foreign merchants abroad, particularly eunuchs, as economic saboteurs diverting efforts from essential activities like agriculture.

Criticism of Zheng He was often indirect, ideological, meant to curb China's openness. Emperor Zhu Gaozhi banned overseas travel and trade, halted shipbuilding and repairs, and punished dissenters. Zheng He's maps were destroyed, ships left to rot; only a few compasses, charts, and local legends survived: "The sea took them, but the wind still whispers their names…"

China's retreat from maritime success and pursuit of isolation left coastal defenses weak, making the population easy prey for raiding pirates, often Japanese, who pillaged villages.

Contrary to Bertolucci's advice—"Film students should stay as far away as possible from film schools and teachers. The only school for cinema is cinema itself"—I, after finishing school, began working at the Chinese Communist Party Central Propaganda Department. Our job was to guide state-supported or semi-independent film companies, collaborate with them, and produce social media content aligned with Party policies on national unity, morality, anti-drug messages, and environmental awareness for platforms like WeChat, TikTok, and Weibo. After two years, I moved to a production company as an assistant director.

The company sent me to the Łódź Film School in Poland, where directors like Roman Polanski, Krzysztof Kieślowski, and Andrzej Wajda had graduated. I stayed six months, consulted with professors about *Admiral of the Seven Seas*, and even met a friend, Clark Kent, a journalist who had left university. Clark helped me immensely; for example, when I adapted Isaac Asimov's short story from *Amazing Stories* (April 1941) into a short film, he assisted me frequently.

Upon returning from Poland, I discussed my project with the production company executives. They told me *Admiral of the Seven Seas* worked commercially but for festivals, it needed to be award-worthy. In my presentation, I described Bukhara, a critical Silk Road trade hub where East met West. Marco Polo's father and uncle had been stranded there in 1271 due to Mongol succession struggles, trading for three years before traveling to China and meeting Kubilai Khan's envoys.

I explained Zheng He's life: born Mahmud Shams in Bukhara, castrated at age ten, later renamed Ma He, then Zheng He as an admiral, descendant of Sayyid Jalal Shams al-Din Umar al-Bukhari. I emphasized Emperor Yongle and his treasure ships, linking the seven maritime expeditions to modern trade wars, highlighting the Yongle Dadian and the Forbidden City, and mentioning the Mormon FamilySearch archives in Salt Lake City.

I also explained that the film would frame these historical events in the context of Western anti-technology forces, akin to Amish sects, trying to divert China from technological progress. One executive fluent in Turkish warned, "This is risky. In Turkish, there is a saying: 'Putting a watermelon rind into a donkey's head.' Whoever the donkey is, let's not do it here." I realized the project would be extremely challenging.

Last night, I couldn't sleep. I thought of another film about the poet Qu Yuan. I read his poem "Meeting Sorrow," which expresses a profound patriotism, grief over his nation's suffering, and acceptance of personal risk for virtue.

My journey has been long and distant, shrouded in darkness.
It was like the dream I chased but lost along the way.
I drew a deep sigh and wiped my tears,
Grieved for my people, burdened by so much suffering.

My heart loved purity, and so I am not regretful;
I would even be willing to die a thousand times!
The sun and moon passed swiftly, endlessly,
Spring and autumn chasing one another in haste.

I rode my noble steeds,
Fearing that time would abandon me.
Before the flowers lost their beauty,
Before the lovely grasses withered, they must be gathered.

Now I am alone in this barren land,
The cries of the weeping drift through the wind.
Who will understand me in this sorrowful world?
I have strayed from my path, departed from the right way.

My heart is filled with anguish, undecided;
In this generation, there is none who understands me.
Should I go to where the old sages lived,
Or does this world no longer desire me?

Qu Yuan, an official and poet during the Warring States Period (475–221 BCE), ultimately drowned himself in protest against corruption. His death led to the Dragon Boat Festival traditions, such as offering rice dumplings to protect fish from his body.

I also revisited my notes about the mythological Qilin: a deer-dragon hybrid with a dragon-like head, deer body, fish scales, lion tail, hooves like a horse, surrounded by flames, a harbinger of the Golden Age, wisdom, peace, prosperity, and good governance. One hunter captures the Qilin and brings it to Confucius. On its forehead is written: “This animal is sacred but not suited for the times,” which Confucius interprets as an omen of approaching death.

I envisioned the Qilin not as a creature but as the awakening of a legend. Its body would appear in fragments—head, scales, tail, hooves—never fully visible. The audience would sense its presence without fully seeing it. Light would shimmer on every detail, flames would ripple the air, and its movements would carry a fluid energy like water. The narrative would expand dreamlike rather than like a documentary.

The Qilin’s presence would coincide with nature’s awakening: flowers blooming, waters and sky gleaming golden. The story would not rely on a narrator but on emotions. The color palette: warm tones of gold, amber, and earth. This world would reflect a dreamlike age of peace and wisdom, with the Qilin embodying the balance of the world.

The forest would appear as the darkness of conscience. The hunter’s breath mixes with rustling leaves; the Qilin emerges for the first time amidst a threat. Its beauty, up close, would be intimidating. The goal: confront human curiosity with the supernatural. The Qilin does not flee; it observes with compassion and judgment, marking the film’s turning point.

After the forest darkness, the scene opens to light—not pure, but tinged with melancholy. In the village square, everything is silent; people are in awe yet uneasy. Confucius’s gaze shifts from surprise to deep sorrow, sensing that what he witnesses is both a miracle and a harbinger of an end. Minimal dialogue; looks and silence convey meaning.

On the Qilin’s forehead appears a text, “This animal is sacred but not suited for the times,” symbolizing human solitude. The image is suffused with gold, light, and vibration. Confucius’s expression reflects divine approval and the cold awareness of death simultaneously; wisdom is now a burden, not salvation. As everything simplifies—light turning white, music fading into

silence—the camera rises from his face to the sky, suggesting human knowledge dispersing, ending with a white void.

At sunrise, I went to bed, dreaming of reading a Qilin inscription:"The creature with an ox tail and deer body walks the desert. Auspicious clouds turn into the sun, people prosper, achieving great success, and in a year of abundant harvest, they praise great peace with songs."

Indecision Ends

The film's title… It was a topic I had pondered for hours, days, even months. Ever since my first year at the Shanghai Film Academy, every class, every discussion, every screening of an old film reminded me of *The Admiral of the Seven Seas*. In my mind, this project had almost become a dream. But now, as an adult director considering the demands of production companies, the expectations of festivals, and today's audience profile, the name alone would not suffice as a historical reference. The film's title had to convey both the story and the symbolism relevant to the contemporary world.

At first, the title *The Admiral of the Seven Seas* made perfect sense for a film about Zheng He's life and his seven maritime expeditions. It was historically and visually appealing, evoking an epic atmosphere. But over time I realized that this name did little more than evoke a historical figure for the audience. It did not establish a direct connection with today's world, nor did it symbolize trade wars, technological manipulations, the complex games of soft power, or even the global impact of individual curiosity and courage. This title would remind viewers only of 15th-century China, showcasing its grandeur but failing to engage in dialogue with the present. I wanted the film to be not just a historical narrative but also a work that interrogates today's world.

It was at this point that the idea of *The Eunuch and the Giraffe* reappeared in my mind. I know it sounds strange; many people will ask, "Why a eunuch?" or "What does the giraffe symbolize?" But this title opens a window from historical figures to the contemporary world. Zheng He, the eunuch, on one hand represented power and authority, traveling to distant ports under the will of the Yongle Emperor, rewriting the rules of diplomacy and trade. But he was also personally deprived, his freedom restricted, shaped by societal decisions. This dynamic remains relevant today in terms of individual freedom and the balance of power. Those who govern technology, shape artificial intelligence, and influence political and economic decisions are powerful yet operate within constrained systems—like modern "eunuchs."

The giraffe added another dimension. The exotic animal brought from Africa was not just a symbol of being foreign, different, or other. It would also represent curiosity, observation, and the desire to learn. The giraffe, with its long neck, can see far, gain perspective from above, and observe horizons unreachable to the human eye.

By combining these two elements, the film's title bridges past and present. The eunuch represents the context of power and limitation from history; the giraffe represents global

perspective and curiosity in the present. I could not confine the story to the 1400s, because the world today is still shaped by power, hierarchy, and constraints. In technological, economic, and cultural arenas, there are still "eunuchs" and "giraffes." Are those wielding technology eunuchs? Are those stretching the limits of human intelligence giraffes? I wanted the audience to reflect on these questions. The title should serve not only as a historical narrative but also as a metaphor critiquing the contemporary world, provoking curiosity and uncertainty in the audience.

Additionally, the title would act as a signal to festivals and critics. A symbolic and provocative title, rather than an epic one, transforms the film from a mere historical documentary into an intellectual experience. *The Eunuch and the Giraffe* communicates: "This film is not just a story of the past; it connects with the present and offers a universal experience through metaphor." Viewers, entering the film, could begin to question not only 15th-century China but also today's global relations, and the balance between power and curiosity.

Finally, when choosing the film's title, I had to consider the link between history and the present. *The Eunuch and the Giraffe* would not only represent a historical figure and an exotic animal but also serve as metaphors for the balance of power, technology, and curiosity in the modern world. This is why I decided: the film's title would be *The Eunuch and the Giraffe*.

Liang Weihao Studies Soft Power

After the production meeting, Liang Weihao thought that writing texts related to the film before drafting the script would be useful preparation. But he honestly could not establish a clear connection between "soft power" and the film he planned to make. He consulted an old friend from university who worked in international relations. His friend tried to explain the importance of soft power through two news articles attached to the email.

The first read: *"Soft Power Divide: As China Advances, the U.S. Falls Behind — March 2025* The global landscape is undergoing profound transformation, a tectonic shift in the balance of influence. The sixth annual Global Soft Power Index published by Brand Finance confirms what many have observed: China has become the world's second most influential soft power nation, just behind the United States.

Coinciding with contrasting political statements from Beijing and Washington, this achievement highlights a critical moment in international relations. While Chinese Premier Li Qiang summarized a vision of openness and engagement, U.S. President Donald Trump advocated a return to isolationism. This divergence provides fertile ground for China to develop its soft power and fill the perceived gap left by a retreating American presence[3].

[3] https://fpif.org/soft-power-divide-china-advances-while-u-s-retreats/

The second article similarly emphasized that the period was favorable for China to catch up with U.S. soft power: *"China is approaching U.S. soft power in many regions and will now attempt to step into the gap and overshadow Washington's influence."*[4]

The concept of "soft power," popularized by American Professor Joe Nye, one of America's leading international relations scholars, is defined as: "Soft power is the ability to shape the preferences of others through appeal and attraction rather than coercion or payment." Nye described it as convincing others to achieve desired outcomes through persuasion and appeal rather than force.

During his academic career, Nye served as assistant secretary of state, chair of the National Intelligence Council, and deputy secretary of defense for international security affairs. In interviews, he explained how U.S. soft power declined during the Trump era, noting that American universities could continue educating foreign students, and humanitarian initiatives like vaccine distribution in Africa could still exercise soft power.

Liang learned from his readings that President Trump was not effective in soft power, and how a country treats its own citizens matters more than how it treats distant foreigners. China, he realized, was even less successful than the Soviet Union at concealing treatment of its own people. Soviet aid in India was appreciated but did not engage the ordinary populace; the seductive influence of rock music, Hollywood films, and Coca-Cola could not compete. The Berlin Wall fell not under artillery fire but by hammers and bulldozers wielded by people who had lost faith in communism and were drawn to Western values.

China's Confucius Institutes abroad and infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative could positively affect soft power. Yet, when Chinese naval ships chased fishing boats in disputed South China Sea waters, those gains could be nullified. Slowly, Liang realized that international relations were a game of power. He thought to himself: "Perhaps it's exactly time to send Zheng He's Treasure Ships out. Using Emperor Yongle's idea of 'scale matters,' we could dispatch ships with massive three-dimensional play areas to other countries, contributing to China's persuasive influence."

The subject of soft power increasingly absorbed Director Liang. He read in newspapers that in 2005, to celebrate the 600th anniversary of Zheng He, six hundred Ming-style imperial cooking vessels were exhibited at the Nanjing Museum. The next day, Liang took a high-speed train from Beijing to Nanjing to visit the Zheng He Museum. He had initially wanted to explore the museum online but, finding it unavailable, he traveled to Nanjing, reflecting on the need to spend more time understanding China's soft power.

Standing in front of the Zheng He statue in Nanjing Cultural Park, he studied it closely. Mazu, the Taoist goddess considered the protector of sailors, was represented. At the Tianfei Temple

[4] https://www.cfr.org/blog/us-soft-power-spiraling-asia-china-filling-void

(Mazu Temple) in Nanjing, a stele carved in 1415 by the emperor recorded prayers and offerings made by Zheng He and his crew during their voyages.

"Tianfei, with great benevolence, calms the vast seas and makes the winds favorable. She follows the order of the heavens and maintains the peace of the kingdom. We set sail into the Southeast seas, carrying the emperor's virtue to foreign nations. We reached all destinations and were welcomed with generous gifts. This inscription is made to eternalize our gratitude. May her protection light every voyage. The Tianfei Temple was built by imperial decree. We were sent to many countries in the Western Ocean with officials and soldiers. The winds were favorable, the waves calm; this success was due to the goddess's sacred protection. We encountered no difficulties and fulfilled our mission successfully."

Liang had also read about the *Galle Trilingual Inscription* in Sri Lanka, prepared by Zheng He on February 15, 1409, to show his respect for Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam, written in Chinese, Tamil, and Persian:

"Gold, silver, silk, perfumes, and precious stones were offered to the great god Buddha. He ends the suffering of all beings and illuminates the world with the light of virtue. Through his mercy, we voyaged peacefully across distant seas."

"In the name of Allah. Praise be to the exalted Allah, Lord of heaven and earth, for guiding the right path and establishing justice. Through His grace, this journey was completed safely."

Zheng He and Mao

I am in Beijing, working as an assistant in a studio. Rain taps on the rusty roof. Extras for a film set in the Yongle era are dozing in the dressing room; a giraffe model in the corner watches me with its plastic eyes. I think: Who was Zheng He, really? A hero, or an illusion? Our history books tell us he sailed the seas, but Mao's books tell us the sea was a "colonial dream."

I don't want to believe either of them, because both are incomplete: one loved the sea, the other feared it. Mao believed in the land. Land was revolution. Land was the people. But the sea… the sea was the "other." The direction from which the West came, of corruption, trade, wine, and missionaries. My grandfather had once gone to Shanghai during Mao's era to see the sea, but he returned without boarding a ship. "The sea is bourgeois business," they told him.

Zheng He's giraffe, a gift from Africa, was not merely a gift—it was a symbol of our future. A dream, an animal stretching its neck into infinity. We cut that neck. That's why we live now with bowed heads. When Zheng He's maps disappeared, China's imagination receded with the waters. Mao gave us back the land but took away our horizon.

With the film I will make, I want to reclaim that horizon—not as propaganda, but like a dream. The camera will focus where sea meets land. That line will mark a boundary between Mao's line and Zheng He's route. On one side, the scent of soil; on the other, salt. I want to fit both scents into the same frame.

Sometimes I wonder: If Mao had seen Zheng He's fleet, what would he have said?
"The sea disperses China's revolutionary spirit."
But Zheng He would reply:
"The sea carries China's spirit."
And I, standing behind the camera, would quietly say to both, "Agreed." The film would end, but the debate would not.

My film will be China's effort to reclaim its own voice. Mao buried our voice in the land, Zheng He left it in the waves. Now I want to merge those two voices into a single echo. I might call it "The Giraffe's Echo." Neither mired in Mao's mud nor soaked in Zheng He's salt—it will be somewhere in between. Neither land nor sea. Perhaps exactly like China today: floating with AI but still remembering how to walk on land.

1421

The streets of Calicut, with the scent of spices and roofs made from palm leaves, lie on the Malabar Coast in northern Kerala, India, and have been a major trading hub since ancient times. In 2012, the city earned the title "City of Sculptures." From the 7th century onward, Arab, European, and Chinese merchants traded here, and religious beliefs intertwined with art. Almost every corner is decorated with traditional Indian sculptures and Hindu temples adorned with detailed statues of gods and goddesses.

Once, the Chinese navy was stationed in this port as the sole source of firepower to protect the city from foreign invasions and to suppress uprisings against local rulers. In 1421, had you lived in Calicut, where Indian fabrics and pepper were traded, you would have seen that when the Chinese treasure ships arrived, the convoy included over 800 sails. A European merchant described the Chinese ships: "The Chinese ships are like large houses, not like ours. They have ten or twelve sails and large water tanks inside. Some are compartmentalized, so if one section floods, the others remain dry, and the ship can complete its voyage." Marco Polo noted that the watertight compartments helped hold water in case of damage from rocks or an attacking whale.

Admiral Zheng He of the Ming Dynasty, wearing a long red robe and a tall black hat, would disembark and walk through Calicut's streets. As the treasure fleet returned to China, it carried "dragon's saliva" (amber), incense, lions, leopards, ostriches from Africa; elephants, parrots, sandalwood from Siam (modern Thailand); and pearls and gold-threaded fabrics from Calicut.

The city's rulers once introduced Zheng He to Da Conti, a 15th-century Venetian explorer and trader. Da Conti had traveled from Venice to Egypt, learned Arabic, married a Muslim woman, and converted to Islam. He set out for India, arriving in Calicut in late 1420. He came because the city had been the center of the Nestorian Christians, a sect that developed in Syria in the 6th century. At the time, a church there belonged to followers of Saint Thomas, known as the Holy Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East. Da Conti asked them, "Do you know the Pope?" and observed their religious rituals.

Zheng He had heard that Da Conti possessed copies of maps depicting Chinese naval expeditions and wanted to meet him. It was also rumored that although Da Conti was Muslim, few believed it. Perhaps he pretended to be Muslim for safety during travel, knowing he would later have to reconcile with the Papacy.

Years later, when the Portuguese would exploit Da Conti's maps to take over the spice trade from the Chinese, Zheng He might have treated Da Conti differently. In a courtyard at a local inn, sipping tea with the help of an interpreter, Da Conti expressed respect to Zheng He, the Emperor, and asked where to buy cheap ginger; Zheng He suggested a few locations. Their conversation included:

> "I heard Venice is a city on the water with churches. Is it far from Rome, where the Pope resides?"
>
> "Nine or ten days by horse-drawn carriage. I learned in Calicut that your emperor's name is Yongle, meaning 'Perpetual Happiness.' Apparently, your emperor lives in an unbelievably large palace called the Forbidden City."
>
> "Yes, he does. Though you live not far from the Pope in Venice, you later married a woman in Egypt and converted to Islam. I too was a Muslim in Yuan China until age 10, then taken to the palace and became Buddhist."

Da Conti knew that Zheng He had been taken from a Muslim family at age ten, castrated, and raised alongside Zhu Di (later Emperor Yongle), and that power in the Chinese court largely rested with eunuchs. He had also heard that in the Vatican, the Pope's private chambers were served by eunuchs, and that just before leaving Venice, a friend had told him about the *Castrati*—boys castrated before puberty to sing in church choirs.

> "I heard China made an encyclopedia called 'Yongle Dadian' but I don't understand it."
>
> "'Yongle Dadian' means 'Great Canon of the Emperor of Perpetual Happiness.' It was compiled by 2,000 scholars. Our naval expeditions are part of this work."
>
> "Why are your ships called treasure ships?"
>
> "Our expeditions are not for trade; we carry diplomatic gifts—gold, silver, silk, porcelain. The gifts sent to our emperor by other countries are also treasures. We sail by imperial order to bring peace and prosperity. I hear you are interested in navigation and maps."

Haji Mahmud Shams

Haji Mahmud Shams lived in Kunyang, a town in Yunnan province, with earth-colored houses. It was a spring city, mild and filled with flowers, where the sun warmed people's hearts. Locals farmed rice, grains, and tea; his father traded silk, and his mother sometimes wove at home.

As a child, Shams ran through Kunyang streets with his Chinese friend Li Yun, who always smiled, playing with wooden horses made by his father. Li Yun's family was wealthy; sometimes

they would walk to nearby Dianchi Lake, and Li Yun's father would take them on his boat, letting them catch gold-striped fish. Shams' family was Muslim, his father named Kerameddin ("honor and generosity of religion"), and his grandfather Mir Tekin had been on the pilgrimage to Mecca.

From 1371 to 1381, he was called Haji Mahmud Shams. He played with tops, bamboo kites, and paper lanterns, enjoyed fishing in the lake, and learned of Timur and his family's history. His grandfather told stories of Bukhara, carpets, and paper-making along the Silk Road.

In Kunyang, meaning "City of the Sun Brothers," Shams received Islamic education until age 10. His grandfather taught him about a long-necked animal called a giraffe and an emperor to whom it was gifted. Inspired by these stories, Shams once dreamed of a giraffe floating in a lake, only to learn that giraffes don't swim but walk on land.

In 1381, the Ming army captured Kunyang from the Yuan Dynasty. Shams was playing outside when Chinese horsemen captured him, taking him to the palace along with other boys. He was renamed Ma He; "Ma" was short for Muhammad. At age 10, he was castrated and put into palace service.

Famous historian Sima Qian, in 99 BCE, described castration as "the worst of all punishments… this humiliation can never be erased."

Later, Ma He aided Zhu Di's rise to the throne during the Jingnan Rebellion (1399–1402). Impressed with his military and organizational skills, Zhu Di gave him the title Zheng He, symbolizing "seriousness, stability, and loyalty."

Sun Yaoting, the last eunuch of the Chinese empire, was castrated at home by his father in 1911 during the Chinese upheaval. Soon after, the emperor was overthrown, and the centuries-old tradition ended. The procedure had been excruciating: no anesthesia, a razor used to remove all genital organs from an 8-year-old, with pepper sprinkled to reduce pain. Recovery lasted months, leaving Sun nearly immobile for eight weeks.

The Treasure Fleet

In the early 15th century, Zheng He made seven expeditions to the South Seas over twenty years, visiting over 30 countries, leaving a permanent mark on world maritime history. His fleet consisted of 100–200 ships, 40–60 of which were treasure ships, carrying around 20,000 men. Most were military personnel, but there were also civilian boatmen, clerks, helmsmen, blacksmiths, interpreters, managers, accountants, ship caulkers, sailors, and others.

Ships were built in Nanjing and assembled at Liujiagang Port in Taicang, Jiangsu Province before sailing. Treasure ships were about 150 meters long from bow to stern, with rudder masts 11 meters tall, and each carried 12 sails.

Zheng He's expeditions were state-sponsored diplomatic missions, not exploratory voyages. His goal was to enhance imperial prestige, not trade or establish colonies. Upon arriving at a

port, he met local rulers and read an imperial edict announcing the benefits of Ming rule. Gold, silver, and silk were given as diplomatic gifts, while exotic goods and spices were brought back to China—including, at times, a giraffe, lions, unicorns, and deer from Africa.

This "gunboat diplomacy" lasted only about 30 years. Jealous court bureaucrats curtailed eunuch power, policy turned inward, Zheng He's maps were burned, and the fleet disbanded. China would not again possess a naval force capable of reaching the South China Sea islands for 500 years—until the United States arrived.

Shortly after the treasure voyages ended, the emperor banned all overseas travel and the construction and repair of ships. Disobedient sailors were executed. Within a century, the world's largest navy was doomed, and Japanese pirates ravaged China's coasts.

The Navy's Decaying Shadows

When Liang Weihao read the newspaper, his coffee was still hot: *"As the Belt and Road Initiative enters its twelfth year, China's global influence is once again a topic of debate."* The lines oscillated as if between a propaganda film and a warning manifesto. For a moment, the shadows of Zheng He's fleet appeared before his eyes. Those massive ships… the silence of the eunuchs carrying porcelain, silk, spices, and hope on their decks… And then, an order arrived suddenly: *"Recall the fleet."*

Liang knew that history in China is never just history. It is the subconscious of the state. When Zheng He's ships decayed, in truth, China's curiosity about the outside world had also decayed. A civilization had recalled its own horizon. The smell of those rotting ships lingered—like the rusted dream of an entire nation.

Now, in the concrete jungle of 2025, that dream resurfaced. The Belt and Road Initiative—a new fleet, but this time woven from fiber-optic cables, pipelines, and trade routes. Liang thought: *"Is this the modern shadow Zheng He left on the seas?"* Yet then a voice whispered inside him—not as a director, but as a Chinese citizen: *"What if someone wants to recall the ships again?"*

For every expansion produces fear; whenever China reaches out to the world, someone wants that hand withdrawn. Some justify it with security, others in the name of "ethics" or "balance." Liang felt that hum between the lines of the newspaper: China is growing too fast, China is going too deep, China speaks too much.

Perhaps the world wanted China to be silent again, just as in Zheng He's time. But now the enemy was not in the seas, but in the depths of information networks. Withdrawal is no longer built with walls, but with algorithms. And as Liang looked through the camera's viewfinder, he could feel this silent siege. The fire that once burned Zheng He's ships never went out—it merely changed form. Now that fire burned beneath the blue lights of data centers.

Liang Weihao imagined a scene in his mind: one man departing from Nanjing in 1405, another looking from the same port in 2025. Both gazing to the ends of the earth—one with hope, the

other with doubt. And Liang thought: *"What if this time, it's not us, but others who stop the fleet?"*

He lit a cigarette, folded the newspaper, and murmured only: *"The ships rotted back then… but the sea is still here."*

First Meeting

The first to arrive at the initial meeting was Eleanor Davies, wearing an early grey suit. Upon entering, she looked at the photographs of Lord Maynard Keynes and David Held, then sat at a spot at the meeting table. She recalled Held's widely translated textbook *Models of Democracy.* When Held, whom she once described as "a polite anarchist," died of cancer at age 67, they had been on bad terms. Over time, everything fades; only photographs remain, and the past loses its meaning.

Soon, David Rosenberg entered the room in his usual black suit. David said he had missed Eleanor; when she showed him the photos on the wall, he responded: *"I don't know David Held personally, but I think he argued that global economic relations were shaped in favor of multinational corporations and powerful states, opposed to unregulated globalization. Trade wars, in his view, often reflected a power-driven rather than rule-based world trade system."*

Eleanor replied: *"You're right, David. He spoke about how protectionist policies and tariffs would increase global inequalities,"* then laughed and added: *"Dear David, I think we started without catching our breath."* They then discussed the works of Vikram Patel and his wife Nalini Kapoor, noting their irritation at Patel's late arrival.

Neither fully understood what exactly was expected of them in the report they were to write. David explained he had made several calls about the matter and that recently they were asked to focus more on the trade wars between the U.S. and China rather than the U.S.-U.K. tensions. Eleanor responded: *"How could we know how to stop China? Only God knows. I hope we can solve the problem that keeps Apple CEO Tim Cook awake at night. Apple first educated an entire country, and now China is using what it learned against America. There's nothing surprising about this."*

Eleanor added: *"The world is undergoing a massive transformation, but we struggle to understand it. Previously, change was driven by what humans did with technology, and because we knew humans, we could understand it. Now, change is driven by what technology does to humans. The weight of influence has shifted from humans to machines, and humanity is entering a period where, for the first time, it will experience relationships with a machine at least as intelligent as itself—a machine it has never known or experienced. It feels like we are navigating uncharted waters without a map, and I suspect our bewilderment will only grow."*

David viewed China as an incredibly complex country. As Chinese scientist Qin Hui put it, China's competitiveness relied on *"low wages, low welfare, and low human rights."* The world's largest and most capitalist American company, Apple, built its success on a country with

"communist" in its name, and now looked to India for help. As Apple shifted to India, it would move away from China's massive consumer base. Apple's AI ventures were not going smoothly. Huawei sought revenge against the U.S., and Donald Trump's tariffs could also trouble Apple. In short, everyone was biting into the apple and struggling.

David reminded Eleanor that Tim Cook personally donated $1 million to Trump's inauguration. *"The man knew Trump's dangers, Eleanor. Everything has changed, my dear. Perhaps someone thought that people like us, older, might struggle to link China's rise—the most significant economic event since the Industrial Revolution—with technology."* He added that Vikram and Nalini were usually seen at the Rand Corporation in the U.S.

A few seconds after David finished, Vikram Patel entered. After the usual introductions, they began their first meeting at the table. David and Vikram approved Eleanor as editor of the report from the start, and she thanked them.

Vikram emphasized that he did not view this as a U.S.-China war; in today's nuclear balance, no one could truly defeat anyone. *"Schools tell us Columbus discovered America and Europeans began the Age of Discovery. But even the most meticulous scholars recognize surprising features on ancient Western maps, many areas mapped before the Age of Discovery. China, at the time, was the world's greatest naval power. I refer to a book detailing Admiral Zheng He's Ming Treasure Fleets, which explored much of the world before Columbus—showing the Chinese began discovering the world very early."*[5]

He continued: *"If we see globalization starting with the Mongol Empire on land and the Chinese Empire at sea, today's Chinese achievements should not be so surprising. Also, the old nuclear race has now been replaced by AI competition."*

Vikram added that even the 4th-century BCE mythological book *Mountains and Seas* might correctly suggest Chinese migration to America. In 1421, while Zheng He explored the oceans, world trade was dominated by China and other Asian powers. Perhaps entrepreneurial spirit in China developed earlier than in Europe.

David sought Eleanor's support to imply that Vikram was pro-China. Eleanor responded lightly: *"Gavin Menzies has a book called 1421. Let me make tea,"* filling the kettle with water from a bottle on the table, laughing: *"Tea helps everything. This tea likely comes from India or China."*

Vikram continued: *"You may not believe me, but science must remain open to innovation. Göbekli Tepe, 12,000 years old in southeastern Turkey, challenged historians' old answer to 'Did agriculture or temples come first?'—flipping it from 'Agriculture' to 'Temple.' In Boncuklu Tarla, jewelry finds show women adorned themselves 10,000 years ago. Like Göbekli Tepe, there are monumental ceremonial structures with paved ritual grounds."*

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[5] Wang Sheng-Wei, Chinese Global Exploration, In the Pre-Columbian Era, Evidence from an Ancient World Map, World Scientific, 2024, s.ix.

David explained to Vikram how Apple's production shift to China was believed to help a middle class develop, but economic success instead strengthened Chinese authorities and allowed Beijing to use production as leverage. An ex-Apple engineer said, *"We educated a whole country, and now it uses that against us."*

While preparing tea, Eleanor added: *"I agree with Vikram that China shouldn't be underestimated. But David's analysis leads to the idea that the West has little recourse against China—which isn't entirely correct. Trump's tariffs might be misguided now, but we need alternatives. Are we really going to resort to past CIA 'mind control' projects like Sidney Gottlieb's against Russia?"*

David countered: *"Dear Eleanor, mind control should have been applied to Trump. He would grant foreign student visas based on social media monitoring, calling it democracy. The world is going in a very wrong direction. China surveils its citizens, but America also watches everything, relevant or not."*

Vikram concluded: *"Göbekli Tepe and Boncuklu Tarla provide keys to understanding past and present political-economic dynamics. Trade wars, economic competition, and cultural struggles are rooted in the same mental framework. Humans have always created structures—temples—to enforce ideology and collective reasoning. Power and adornment are in our DNA. Technological races inevitably echo military power displays."*

Eleanor responded: *"Interesting, Vikram. So 10,000 years ago, women followed men who gave them sparkling jewelry; today, perhaps it's those who gift small Prada bags."*

Vikram shifted topics: *"Speaking of bags, gods in Mesopotamia, South America, the Mayans, Göbekli Tepe, Egypt, and Australia often carry similar small bags. Globalization is far older than we realize. We have no text describing these bags, but perhaps Jung's 'collective unconscious' can explain it. Humans have long symbolized nature, power, and knowledge with similar imagery."*

David considered that perhaps widely separated societies were coordinated by something else. He noted pyramids in Egypt, South America, China, Sudan, Indonesia, and even Bosnia might have other reasons. *"Sometimes I think there was a much older, global advanced civilization. The stonework and astronomical knowledge across civilizations, and flood myths in Sumer, Mayan, Hindu mythology, and religious texts—how do these narratives repeat across distant times and places?"*

Perhaps the most pessimistic was Eleanor. Widowed and isolated, with her son in MI6, she worried constantly. She spoke of the U.S. building up Diego Garcia, a small British island in the Indian Ocean, for military purposes, and referenced the MAD—mutual assured destruction—process. Touching David's shoulder, she said: *"Let's look at today's narratives. The world has lost its mind. We're crazy enough to detonate nuclear bombs. Perhaps the U.S. made its biggest mistake in Gaza. Are we going to see nuclear winter or blow everything up in our collective subconscious, David?"*

Vikram returned to the main topic: *"Trump imposes a tax, then retracts it. Rule-based world order and diplomacy are gone. America deals with finance, China with production. There will be a struggle between finance and production. China tied rare earth exports to permits, used in F35 engines, drones, submarines. China produces 70% of the world's rare elements. America lacks the iron and blood for war; China is patient and knows when to submit. China's cards are rising while America's are dwindling."*

He warned of the Evangelical approach: *"Many Evangelical Christians support Israel strongly, often unconditionally, due to end-times beliefs. This predicts Jews returning to holy lands and rebuilding the Temple before Jesus' return. Although India-Israel relations have grown strategically, I view this differently."*

The Banality of Evil

Clark Kane had once, as a journalist for the newspaper he worked at, attended a symposium titled *"Artificial Intelligence and Ethics"* at the Lódź Film School in Poland. There, his friend Liang Weihao introduced him to an American Amish named Eli Yoder. Clark didn't quite understand what an American Amish was doing at a symposium on *Artificial Intelligence and Ethics* in Poland, but Liang—a remarkably calm individual who insisted Eli Yoder was a good friend—spoke of a concept from network science called *closure*, explaining: *"If A is friends with B and C is friends with B, over time, A and C will also become friends."*

Later, Clark learned from Liang that Eli worked in London at a company called *Amish Technologies*. During his *rumspringa*—the 16–17-year-old period when young Amish are allowed to experience the modern world and choose their beliefs freely—Eli realized he did not adopt the Amish faith system and decided to leave the sect permanently. In the Amish community, this was possible: unbaptized youth, not yet officially members of the Amish church, could make this choice.

Having grown up distanced from technology and later encountering big data and algorithms, Eli Yoder became one of the founders of Amish Technologies. Initially, the company was named *TRex Technologies*. But since Eli was a former Amish, all his close friends referred to the company as *Amish Technologies*. The name became so widespread that it was said Eli once absentmindedly wrote *Amish Technologies* on official legal forms. Eventually, Yoder officially changed the company's name to *Amish Technologies*.

During the symposium, one day, Clark, Liang, and Eli were having coffee in the school cafeteria when the conversation turned to Poland's experiences during World War II. Liang summarized: *"Poland was the first victim of World War II. During the war, it was invaded and partitioned by both Germany and Russia. The Germans established death camps at Auschwitz, Treblinka, Sobibor, and Belzec, killing Jews in gas chambers."*

The discussion then shifted to Hannah Arendt's concept of *the banality of evil*. Arendt had developed this idea in her 1963 book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. In her view, *"Evil grows in the absence of thought."* Arendt wrote the book after observing the

trial of Adolf Eichmann in Israel in 1961, originally for *The New Yorker*, and later compiled the articles into a book.

Eichmann, on trial, was a high-ranking bureaucrat in the Nazi regime responsible for sending millions of Jews to death camps. Yet Arendt observed that he was not a diabolical figure but an ordinary man who followed orders without thinking, performing his bureaucratic duty. Evil is not always committed through deep hatred or sadism; sometimes people commit enormous evils by following rules or societal norms without reflection. Individuals who obey authority blindly often try to evade responsibility, saying: *"I was just following orders."*

Clark Kane believed AI would make such dynamics even more complex. Humans could blame machines for crimes, making evil appear ordinary. Liang supported this idea: *"It's not my fault. The algorithm decided, or the system works this way,"* while Eli Yoder listened quietly. Surely, in the future, people would hide behind excuses like *"The AI made the decision, I just executed it."* Civilians killed by drones could be blamed on machines. Algorithmic scoring systems in China, applied using data collected from cameras across the country, could similarly be blamed on the system.

Clark Kane explained: *"No algorithm removes human moral responsibility. But with AI, people have another escape: 'No one, including scientists, knew how neural networks worked. They are black boxes. How could we know they'd do this?'* Deep learning models contain billions of parameters, and their inner workings are often uninterpretable—intuitively incomprehensible for humans. AI must first be made explainable." Eli Yoder nodded in agreement: *"You're absolutely right."*

While in the cafeteria, Clark also read a brochure Eli had given him, explaining what the company does:

Amish Technologies™ – The Technology of the Silent Revolution

📍 **About Us**
Founded in Cambridge in 2012, Amish Technologies is a global leader in ethical technology design, focusing on managing digital transformation without harming human nature.
We develop simple, conscious, and nature-aligned technology solutions to counter cognitive fatigue, digital addiction, and identity erosion caused by high-tech environments.
Today, we operate in 14 countries across Asia and Europe and are founders of the new digital minimalism movement.

🌐 **Our Vision**
To make technology serve humans.
Otherwise, humans become the slaves of technology.
We seek depth through less, not speed.
We balance AI and the human spirit in favor of humans.

🔍 **What We Do**

🔷 *Cognitive CleanTech™* – Interface systems that provide mental detox and filter information overload.

🔷 *Ethical OS Design* – Ethical digital experiences preventing attention exploitation online.

🔷 *Minimalist Intelligence Layers (MIL)* – Software solutions enabling digital simplicity in social media, e-learning, and content consumption.

🔷 *PanAsia WellTech Initiative* – Global awareness programs promoting digital sustainability, especially in Eastern societies.

🤝 **Strategic Partnerships**

Amish Technologies bridges academia, government, and the private sector.
Collaborations include RAND Corporation, Cambridge Behavioural Institute, and [Classified] Federal Data Health Initiative, focusing on ethics-based technology development.

🧠 **What We Are Not**

• We are not a social media company.
• We do not create systems that steal your attention—we create systems that give it back.
• We are an engineering philosophy that respects the wisdom of the past while designing the future.

📞 **Join Us**

Rebuild yourself before digital overload consumes you.
Amish Technologies – Coding the Silence Within You.

If You Want to Work…

On the phone, Sofia said, *"My father is starting a new business with Amish Technologies. If you want to work, I can introduce you to Eli Yoder, the CEO of Amish Technologies in London. The man is incredible when it comes to AI. Have you ever heard of companies like Sama, Scale AI, or CloudFactory? When we asked ChatGPT what these companies do, we learned that they provide low-cost human labor for data labeling, model auditing, and content moderation for major AI firms. They probably do the tasks that help the machine learn."*

By *content moderation*, she meant the process of checking whether text, images, videos, comments, and other content shared on digital platforms comply with platform rules, community standards, laws, or ethical principles—and intervening if necessary. As far as I understood, Amish Technologies worked for companies like Google, OpenAI, Meta, and Microsoft. I told Sofia that I had previously met Eli Yoder and Liang Weihao at a symposium called *"Artificial Intelligence and Ethics"* at the Łódź Film School in Poland.

Sofia didn't remember exactly, but apparently one of the tasks such companies did was *reinforcement learning with human feedback*—known in English as RLHF. Her father had explained that they were indispensable subcontractors in this process. In China and Russia, too, data labeling and RLHF-like work were commonly done in low-income areas for AI

purposes. However, in those countries, universities and local subcontractors usually carried out this work, often state-supported and commissioned by large tech companies.

In a text her father had sent her, it was explained that Scale AI, headquartered in San Francisco, used global low-wage workers to provide image and video labeling for companies and organizations like OpenAI, Cohere, Microsoft, Toyota, and the U.S. Department of Defense. Sofia, unfamiliar with image and video labeling, had asked her father what it meant. He explained that to teach AI, these companies label the objects and features present in a photo or video.

I had once been an unemployed journalist; now I was a low-income lover. In truth, the second state was more dangerous than the first. Unemployment slowly kills you, but love could kill you smiling. Sofia knew this. What I considered love was merely curiosity for her. For her, love was like a strange sound caught in the static frequency of an old radio: perhaps worth listening to for a while, but never precious enough to keep. She also knew I was a fool ready to do whatever she asked. My excess pleased her because it kept her sense of control fresh. I, in turn, treated her laughter as a miracle, mixing into my morning coffee the possibility that the same laughter might one day echo with someone else.

Not for money, but for Sofia, I would do anything. When I told her this, she merely smiled. Since those years at the Lódź Film School, fate had been playing with me with a cruel sense of humor. Back in the days of classes with Liang, and admiring the former Amish Eli Yoder's mastery at connecting everything to technology, I never imagined I would become such a willing captive.

Still, I decided without thinking: whatever Sofia said, that would be it. Perhaps love is when a person leaves their mind as collateral and opens a low-interest life loan in someone else's heart. And I was ready to spend that loan to the last penny.

I immediately accepted Sofia's *"if you want to work"* offer, and she took me to London. Outside one of the buildings near King's Cross station, a fine rain was falling; the moisture seeping through the red brick walls blended with the morning mist. When we arrived under the glittering sign that read *"Amish Technologies"*, the seriousness on Sofia's face made me realize we were not there for an ordinary visit. The door opened to reveal Eli Yoder, whom I had met at the Lódź Film School and who had abandoned the Amish life. Time had affected him; his hair was a little thinner, his gaze deeper, but his familiar sarcasm remained. *"Clark,"* he said with a smile, *"it seems you continue to enter the wrong doors all over the world."*

When we entered the office, I was briefly surprised to see someone waiting for us: Sofia's father, the famous yet enigmatic Romanov. I had read many articles about him; some were conspiracy theories, others financial success stories. As he shook my hand, he looked into my eyes with a measured, calculating curiosity. Then, without wasting a moment, he began to speak:

"Sofia has told us so much about you and your writing," he said in a firm voice. *"We're pleased to meet you. Here, we work on somewhat different projects. You've met Eli in Poland; I suppose you already know him. But let me briefly explain what we do."*

Sofia quietly stepped aside; it was as if Romanov was speaking on her behalf. *"We're running an AI project called Bad Brother,"* he continued—*"a kind of experiment at the intersection of surveillance, manipulation, and conscience. Our other project is Pull the Plug on the Dragon. It involves low-frequency signals, micro-targeting, and other tools. Our primary goal is to make the Chinese wary of technology."*

The calmness in that statement unnerved me. Romanov sounded like he was discussing a global chess game. Then he turned to me: *"You know large language models,"* he said, continuing, *"AI models learn from text. We were impressed by your command of English. Sofia showed us your old writings. Also, our mutual acquaintance Daniel Davies spoke highly of you. You traveled to Japan with him, right?"*

Before I could answer, I exchanged a look with Sofia. That glance said that my responses no longer mattered. I had already been drawn into the game.

My friend Daniel, who once erased his own photo but left mine in reports about Japanese fishermen and rare earth elements… Daniel wasn't someone I particularly liked, but Sofia, sitting beside me, looked into my eyes and said: *"Daniel doesn't matter to us, you do."* Naturally, rivers stop flowing for such words. No matter their goals—though I knew enough to understand that these projects weren't exactly benevolent—my aim was simply to be near Sofia.

After Sofia's father left the office due to his busy schedule, Sofia, Eli Yoder, and I went out to eat. Eli Yoder was one of the strangest people I had ever met, a bundle of contradictions. At the Lódź Film School, he had told Liang that if a film were made about Ted Kaczynski's life, he would invest in it. Now, as a math genius, he said he might even write a book about Kaczynski, the anti-technology advocate. His approach suited the Amish, but the projects he was working on required full tech advocacy, so it was difficult for me to understand what he really intended. Eli was like a politician, quickly reversing his statements.

During the meal, Eli spoke non-stop about recent events in Los Angeles, where undocumented residents had allegedly summoned self-driving Waymo cars to burn themselves, claiming that sometimes technology, like the burned cars, couldn't protect itself while remaining innocent. According to him, self-driving cars should have mechanisms to protect themselves. For a while, Sofia and Eli discussed Michael Levin. While talking about China, Eli said to Sofia: *"If cells can determine an organism's shape through bioelectric coding, we can reshape society through information codes."*

Eli had recently studied Chinese history in depth. *"China has a multilayered history spanning thousands of years. We classified Chinese history in terms of periods of outward engagement—active contact with the outside world, trade, cultural exchange—and inward closure—self-*

sufficiency, distancing from foreign influence, closing borders. We studied whether China's cycles of opening and closing follow a temporal sequence. There isn't a perfectly regular cycle, but we found some patterns and structural similarities. Generally, China closes inward after threats or trauma and opens outward during stability and opportunity," Eli explained. He then showed us a chart on his phone.

"In the chart, changes in China's level of openness throughout its history are shown with a curve. The chart tells us that at certain periods openness peaked, while at other times there was a tendency toward closure. I predict that at the expected turning point in 2026-2027, the change may be more protectionist and inward-looking rather than opening up," Eli said, continuing with excitement:

"You may remember that in May, the news reported 'A Strange Disease in China's Border Regions: Circular Movements in Pupils Cause Panic.' We studied extensively how this occurred. According to one theory, the disease reported in China's border regions causing circular movements in pupils is related to a low-frequency neurospin wave spreading from outside the borders. You know, the term 'neurospin' has two meanings depending on context: one scientific-technical, the other popular or metaphorical. In the scientific-technical sense, neurospin is a field studying the brain's magnetic properties. In the popular sense, it is used to mean 'perception manipulation.' These waves, whoever released them, interact with the brain's system controlling eye movement, causing involuntary and continuous circular eye movements. Another theory suggests that an international satellite-guided neuro-modulation technology, activated only at specific coordinates, may have caused involuntary eye movements in China's border regions," Eli Yoder explained, adding, "Well, maybe this has nothing to do with low-frequency waves from outside or satellite-guided neuro-modulation technology. Perhaps a vaccine administered in those regions caused it. We haven't been able to determine which is correct."

I could hardly believe this man was real. That evening, when I got home, I asked ChatGPT, "Could a real person be both pro-technology and anti-technology, working on such opposing projects while being extremely intelligent?" It replied, "Absolutely. In fact, people who work

within such contrasts are often intellectually deep and possess highly developed critical thinking skills," and gave these examples:

- "Jaron Lanier: A pioneer of virtual reality, yet also a critic of the destructive impact of social media on individuals.
- Noam Chomsky: Revolutionized linguistics, understands technological progress, but opposes the militaristic or exploitative aspects of modern technology.
- Tristan Harris: An ethics expert who worked at Google, later campaigned against technology addiction in the documentary 'The Social Dilemma.'"

That night, Eli Yoder called me. It was exactly 11:30; London's rain still tapped on my window, lights flickering in the fog like faint echoes. The moment I heard his voice, a tension rose inside me because Eli never called without reason.

"Clark," he said, his voice calm as usual but carrying a metallic tension behind it. "I know this question has been on your mind: Why are these people interested in an unemployed journalist like me?" I was silent. I hadn't even asked myself that out loud. He continued, "Now that we will be working together, I need to explain this to you. I've also gotten Romanov's permission."

Hearing that sentence, my heart raced. Romanov's name filled the air like a cold authority. Eli's voice had a measured rhythm—almost hypnotic. Yet within this rhythm, there was a sense of divine pride; it was as if a priest were revealing a sacred secret to a congregation confessing their sins.

"We collected millions of questions directed at open AI systems globally, like ChatGPT," he said. "Each question was rated from 1 to 10 in terms of creativity, depth, originality, and ethical awareness. We measured people's curiosity. We saw who genuinely thought and who merely imitated." A moment of silence followed; the city lights seemed remnants of a dream. Eli's voice returned, lower, closer: "I also got Yevgeny Romanov's permission. We started from the question: 'Can we understand a person's value by the questions they ask?' This system is a way to re-evaluate humanity. And your average score came out incredibly high."

I weighed the words. Was it a compliment or a warning?

"We want to work with you so you ask good questions," he said. "Because some answers only become fruitful when asked by the right person."

After the call, I couldn't move for a long time. I was only thinking: What if what they say is true? My curiosity, the opinion columns I wrote over the years, those small but unsettling questions I asked in conversations… were they all detected by an algorithm?

Then Sofia's face came to mind. She had brought me into this world. Maybe she chose me, maybe she sold me—I couldn't tell. Love and doubt were intertwined; I no longer knew which kept me alive, which held me captive. I went to the window. In the city lights, I saw my reflection. At that moment, I didn't know which truth to believe: the cold logic of Eli Yoder and

Romanov, or Sofia's dangerous warmth? I hung somewhere in between. A train passed outside; the window trembled. The metallic sound of the iron rails echoed my indecision. Maybe they were right. Maybe a person's value really lay in the questions they asked. But my real question was now: Was Sofia my answer, or my best question?

In the Shadow of Creative Destruction: Clark's Perspective

In Amish Technologies' large glass conference room, the midday light filtered over the city's gray buildings. Romanov had called Eli and Sofia to the firm so they could better understand each other. Clark Kane, sitting at the edge of the table, slowly scanned everyone in the room: Eli Yoder was at the screen analyzing complex datasets, Sofia watched her father and Clark with a worried expression. Yevgeny Romanov approached the table with heavy steps, and Clark felt his authority.

Clark thought to himself, "Romanov and Eli probably always defend the destructive side of creativity. But what will be the real cost of this destruction? People, societies… Can such rapid change really carry everyone forward?"

Romanov placed his hands on the table and began: "Creative destruction is not only the engine of the economy but also a spiritual test for the system. As Schumpeter said, innovation destroys the old. But do we ask ourselves who pays the price?" Clark bit his lip: "I do ask that. But you seem to speak theoretically; it feels like you're not really considering the millions of lives affected."

Eli responded with a slight smile: "Clark, every major innovation requires some destruction. Without destruction, production revolutions and technological leaps are impossible." Clark muttered to himself, "But at what cost? Human loss, social tension… How can we tolerate this?"

Sofia spoke to Clark: "But maybe some destruction can be controlled. In Peter Howitt's 'inclusive innovation' model, Nobel Prize 2025, innovation processes aim not only to create technological or economic value but also to promote social equity and benefit everyone. Perhaps minimizing destruction while prioritizing human benefit is possible."

Clark inwardly agreed with Sofia but felt the influence of Eli and Romanov. Romanov continued: "In the 20th century, when factories and machines transformed, labor adapted. But today, algorithms and data networks progress so fast that human adaptation lags. Clark, the ethical risks you mentioned emerge precisely here."

Clark's mind wrestled: "Technological speed can bring progress, but it also endangers human lives. Can these risks be managed? By what mechanisms?"

Eli replied with mild sarcasm: "They can, but it requires leadership and vision. Romanov and I embrace the aesthetics of destruction; it is necessary for the system's renewal."

Sofia leaned toward Clark: “Maybe Eli is right. Sometimes destruction is inevitable for long-term benefit. But this does not mean we should ignore human suffering.”

Clark Kane listened to the silence, inwardly laughing—but the laughter was not a light smile; it was a dark, ironic, tense reaction. “The aesthetics of destruction, really?” he thought. It was so absurd and cliché… As if in an art gallery, people could evaluate destruction as ‘beauty.’ Romanov and Eli were pressuring him precisely here: “Clark, you must understand the aesthetics of destruction.” He rolled his eyes, bit his lip.

Aesthetics… of destruction? Seriously? People dying of hunger, buildings buried under rubble, children traumatized—the discussion of destruction’s aesthetics felt like intellectual play to him. Romanov’s words echoed: “Understanding the aesthetics of destruction is about harnessing the power of creative destruction.” Power aesthetics… Clark smiled inwardly; it was impossible to understand how they paired these words.

He thought of the disaster in Gaza: piles of rubble, destroyed schools, hospitals, hunger, children carrying siblings through tears. Clark smiled internally, but it was a grim humor. “Yes, the aesthetics of destruction,” he thought. “Maybe we should make a painting: ‘Minimalist Chaos, The Rhythmic Texture of Disaster.’”

Clark Kane imagined a gallery scene: photos from Gaza on the walls, captions beneath: “The Harmonious Geometry of Rubble,” “The Rhythm of Disaster,” “The Palette of Destruction.” Visitors examined seriously, critiqued, awards were given. Clark laughed inside: “Wonderful… people are dying and we reward it with artistic analysis… Bravo!”

He stared blankly out the window. Romanov and Eli’s seriousness was evident. To them, the “aesthetics of destruction” was a tool, a power argument. Clark took a deep breath, murmuring: “Yes, Romanov… your aesthetic disaster is right in front of me. But I will not play these games.”

The grim humor grew inside him. “Perhaps Sofia is right. Romanov and Eli think like art critics. They analyze destruction, admire its geometry, its rhythm. But I live in the real world.”

The children of Gaza came to mind again. Clark stopped and thought seriously: “Destruction cannot be aesthetic. Disaster only gains meaning within strategy and responsibility. Without combining it with a vision that enhances human resilience, protects communities, and corrects mistakes, aesthetics is just an innocent illusion.”

Clark Kane expanded this ironic tableau in his mind: people walking through rubble, those who lost their lives, and those who survived. “Ah yes, the aesthetics of destruction… Of course, a perfect argument for Nobel prizes. Human suffering as material for modern art. Bravo!”

Suppressing his dark humor, Clark returned to the real discussion. Romanov and Eli’s gaze was still sharp, Sofia’s supportive presence a small compass. But Clark now knew: the aesthetics of destruction does not exist. If it does, it’s only an illusion, a romantic misconception.

Romanov broke the silence: “Clark, leadership and vision are what matter. If companies pursue only profit and market dominance, destruction becomes aesthetic and human cost is ignored. But with ethical innovation and inclusive strategy, the same technology can empower people. Amish Technologies can achieve this.”

Sofia smiled slightly: “Yes, Clark. And your perspective makes this debate more humane and balanced. Romanov and Eli’s theoretical strength, combined with your ethical concern, can produce a real strategy.”

Clark thought one step further: “Eli and Romanov use Schumpeter’s biological metaphor. But Howitt wants to subject these laws to human dignity. Our task is probably to synthesize the two.”

Romanov added: “Clark, your questions serve as an example for all companies advancing in the shadow of creative destruction. Leaders who pursue only profit and power romanticize destruction, ignoring human cost. But your perspective shows how to make it human-centered and inclusive.”

Romanov continued: “Look at data giants like Palantir. While producing decision-support systems for battlefields, the same algorithms maximize profit in financial markets. The impact of innovation is the same, but the outcomes differ. If you pursue only efficiency, you lose the human. If you center ethics and inclusivity, the same technology can empower humanity.”

Silence fell in the conference room. Clark Kane, considering this balance, understood both the attractive and dangerous sides of creative destruction. Romanov and Eli defended creativity’s dark face, while Clark, occasionally supported by Sofia, sought ways to put ethical and human balance at the center.

As the midday sun filtered through clouds, the light illuminated the room while creating dramatic shadows. Clark Kane, eyes fixed on the city skyline beyond the window, felt that bridging creative destruction and ethical innovation was not just a strategy but a responsibility, even an obligation. He tried to calculate how to place human life, community integrity, and society’s future on this bridge.

Romanov approached Clark with heavy steps, speaking with a mocking tone: “Clark, you must still see everything as if on a novel’s pages. In the world, as in birth, death also exists. You seem unwilling to accept that destruction is inevitable. Your approach is romantic, infused with innocence, but reality is much harsher.”

Clark lifted his head, meeting Romanov’s gaze. He inwardly acknowledged the truth in the words but immediately formed a defensive reflex: “I am not romantic. I just try to think within an ethical framework. Innovation can occur without putting people and communities at risk. This is not imagination; it can come from logical strategy.”

Eli Yoder added with slight sarcasm: “Clark, everything you think is right often falls short in the face of the world’s painful realities. Innovation requires destruction; presenting it romantically

is itself an illusion. You may not want people to suffer, but real change does not come without destruction. Think of Gaza: destruction is happening and you are still trying to romanticize it."

Clark pressed his lips tightly, his mind working intensely. He wasn't romanticizing; he just didn't want the consequences ignored. He was aware of the disaster in Gaza. Arguing that destruction is inevitable while ignoring ethical responsibility was completely wrong.

Romanov continued: "Clark, you still look through an emotional idealism. The world does not conform to your perspective. People suffer, societies fragment, and political manipulations trigger destruction. You want to act ethically, but without understanding the complexity of the real world, this is just a luxury. As with birth, death is inevitable; accept it or not, the truth does not change."

Clark paused, slowly controlling his breath. Inwardly, he thought Romanov was right, but this thought did not convince him to surrender. "You may be right," he said calmly, "but that does not require me to reject human-centered innovation. Yes, death exists, disaster exists. But using technology and creative destruction, we can increase human resilience. This is not a fantasy; it is a strategic necessity."

Eli nodded slightly with a smile, still with a challenging look: "Clark, your strategies are like nostalgia in front of millions suffering in the world. Underestimating destruction, romanticizing it rather than controlling it, is a mistake. And Gaza… your strategy won't work there. Every step we take is shaped by political power games, international fund flows, and energy investments. You still think human-centered; but the ruthlessness of reality invalidates that."

Clark bit his lip, his mind turning complexly. Romanov and Eli's perspective posed a clear threat to his idealism. But Sofia lightly touched his arm and quietly said, "Clark, you cannot stop them completely, but you can maintain your ethical stance. Perhaps this conflict is an opportunity to make strategy more realistic and inclusive."

Clark turned to Sofia and nodded slightly: "You're right. Their worldview may be harsh and destructive. But my duty is to transform this destructiveness into a human-centered vision. Gaza is a lesson for me; there will never be complete agreement here, but at least we can minimize the damage."

Clark Kane, merging all these conflicts in his mind, focused on a strategy that would combine creativity and the aesthetics of destruction with human-centered innovation. He would not romanticize destruction, but transform it into an inclusive, ethical, and human-centered vision. For him, this was not only strategy but also leadership and human responsibility.

The criticisms of Romanov and Eli, while challenging Clark, strengthened his vision. Each warning sharpened his human-centered innovation strategy, making it more realistic and inclusive. Sofia's supportive presence allowed Clark to maintain a balanced perspective, her occasional remarks serving as an ethical compass amid the conflicts. He loved Sofia.

Dark Enlightenment

One of the most debated topics at Amish Technologies was **"micro-targeting."** Literally, micro-targeting meant sending personalized messages to individuals based on their personal data. This method was particularly used in politics, advertising, and psychological manipulation. Eli Yoder and Yevgeny Romanov frequently discussed micro-targeting aimed at the Chinese population. They examined the stages and details of a project designed to discourage technology use, whether through low-frequency tools or via a cult. I kept thinking about the ethical issues of such a project, its potential illegality, its violation of human rights, and its manipulative and destructive potential, and I deeply considered the cost to me of working with them for Sofia's sake.

America was a strange country. Once the champion of democracy, telling stories of democratic triumphs to the world, America had, for reasons unknown, recently started telling stories of **autocracy.** By mid-2025, this strange country was writing articles with titles like, *"A Conservative Blogger's Call for a Monarch to Rule the Country Once Seemed a Joke. Now the Nation Seems Ready to Kneel to the Right."*

In the spring and summer of 2008, an anonymous blogger, Curtis Yarvin—known by his cyber pseudonym Mencius Moldbug among admirers including Peter Thiel, Marc Andreessen, and J.D. Vance—published a 120,000-word manifesto titled *"Open Letter to Open-Minded Progressives."* In it, he argued that egalitarianism was far from improving the world and that it was actually responsible for much of the evil in the world. Moldbug claimed that these issues arose from the influence of the media and academia, which he collectively called **the Cathedral.** He advocated for the destruction of the Cathedral and the complete "reboot" of social order, praising corporations and proposing that someone like Steve Jobs assume leadership of the U.S. The Constitution, law, and democracy would be unnecessary; the government would become "a heavily armed, highly profitable company." Among Yarvin's ambitions was a new computer operating system, envisioned as a "digital republic." He was bold enough to claim, *"Half a revolution digs its own grave."*

Following the ideas of German academic Hans-Hermann Hoppe, who advocated the "Dark Enlightenment" and authored *Democracy: The God That Failed*, Yarvin suggested that nations should ultimately fragment into patches of small, homogenous states like Singapore or Dubai, each ruled by a sovereign. He also drew inspiration from the Ottoman millet system, which allowed religious communities some degree of autonomy.

Curtis Yarvin, whose views influenced Peter Thiel, Marc Andreessen, U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance, and President Donald Trump, had recently begun attracting scrutiny from institutions such as **DARPA**—established in 1958 under the U.S. Department of Defense for high-risk, high-reward R&D projects—and **RAND Corporation**, founded in 1948 to produce strategic analyses for the U.S. Air Force.

The Second Meeting

At Cambridge University, everyone had arrived on time for the second meeting. Although the requirements for the report had been communicated in writing beforehand, Eleanor Davies had been orally instructed that more than a dry economic analysis of trade wars was expected. She had intended to raise this point at the first meeting but had not had enough time. Vikram Patel wondered if he had left his umbrella in this room during the previous meeting, while David Rosenberg complained that the sent documents poorly framed the trade wars. Meanwhile, Eleanor briefly mentioned her son Daniel's experiences in Nigeria with the Chinese, and the meeting began to drift before it officially started.

Finally, Eleanor tapped her pen on her teacup to take control: *"Officials I spoke with from the government and the Palace asked that part of the report focus on how AI could affect trade wars in the medium and long term. Vikram Patel from the Future of Humanity Institute is participating in our group specifically for this purpose. His work focuses on AI impacts."*

According to Vikram Patel, once AI reaches a superintelligent level—currently approaching human-level intelligence—significant problems could emerge. After AI displaces human labor and surpasses human capability, a critical question arises: which human functions will remain essential for life? Patel noted that some philosophers were already considering this issue, warning that humans could feel unnecessary, leading to a profound long-term moral collapse.

Patel argued that people were unprepared for this new era, and the real crisis was psychological, not economic. Unemployment would not only create a loss of income but also a loss of meaning. Humans define themselves more by their capacity to produce than merely by what they consume; losing one's job would mean losing not just livelihood but identity. As AI took over millions of jobs, it would create a fracture not just in employment statistics but in the human psyche. The question "What am I doing?" would give way to "Why do I still exist?"

Throughout history, humans had survived alongside more powerful machines by believing they were fundamentally different. But superintelligent AI could mark the first era where this difference no longer exists. Humans might wake up to find algorithms thinking, empathizing, and performing better than themselves. This realization would not be individual but **species-wide**, a depression on a collective scale, confronting humanity with its successor rather than a rival.

Patel called this scenario a **"collective moral collapse."** The pillars of modern society—labor, competition, and merit—would lose meaning, replaced by a quiet sense of inadequacy. Humans would confront the notion of being "unnecessary" for the first time. The effects would be particularly devastating for the highly educated, creative class, whose existence depended on cognitive power now challenged by AI.

"Saying 'machines can think better than us but cannot feel' may comfort us for a while," Patel explained, *"but once humans see that emotions can also be simulated with data, they may not know what to believe anymore."* A heavy silence fell in the room. Eleanor's pen trembled as

she took notes. Everyone knew: the issue was no longer measuring intelligence but figuring out how to preserve fragile human dignity.

When Patel paused briefly, the silence grew even heavier, as if his words were not a mere theoretical prediction but a harbinger of a collapse already underway. As AI infiltrated the workforce, societal reactions could transform from economic statistics into an existential crisis.

Humans would not only lose jobs but also sense the devaluation of their own minds. Engineers could watch decades of intuitive skill dissolve in mere weeks under an algorithm's code. Writers could lose faith in words as AI replicated their sentences in seconds. When humans realized their intelligence was no longer the ultimate benchmark, all pillars of identity would begin to crack.

This mindset could morph into **collective melancholy**, where people worldwide might feel "meaningless" rather than "unemployed." Some might quietly retreat, comparing their productivity to machines; others might console themselves by dismissing AI systems. Yet everyone knew deep down: there was no turning back. Patel termed this era not just economic but **psychological human regression**, as humans' defining trait—the ability to learn and think—was being surpassed.

After Patel spoke, Eleanor sat silently, reflecting on a lingering question: *"Perhaps the greatest danger is not that AI destroys us, but the hopelessness it implants within us."* David Rosenberg leaned over his notebook, perhaps framing the same question in different words. Unnoticed by all, the same thought crossed everyone's mind: as one era ended, no one knew where the new age would place them.

Philosophy had long been David Rosenberg's special interest. He began explaining how his friend David Chalmers of NYU distinguished between "easy" and "hard" problems of consciousness. Chalmers, a skilled guitarist, described AI as a philosophical zombie: a machine that performs operations without experiencing meaning, morality, pain, or happiness. It functions like a washing machine, without an actual subject. Raising his voice slightly, Rosenberg concluded, *"Until consciousness is achieved, AI remains merely a machine."*

Eleanor asked, *"A zombie that has taken a person's job?"*

Vikram Patel added, *"There are other perspectives. As Ilya Sutskever said, timing is secondary; eventually AI will do everything we can do. Then the question arises: what will humans do? Ray Kurzweil suggests humans might form a symbiotic relationship with AI, becoming part of it. Elon Musk's Neuralink proposes integrating machine and human intelligence via brain implants. Nick Bostrom warns that superintelligence could annihilate humanity if uncontrolled, and Yuval Harari argues Homo sapiens will lose cognitive dominance, leaving many humans obsolete."*

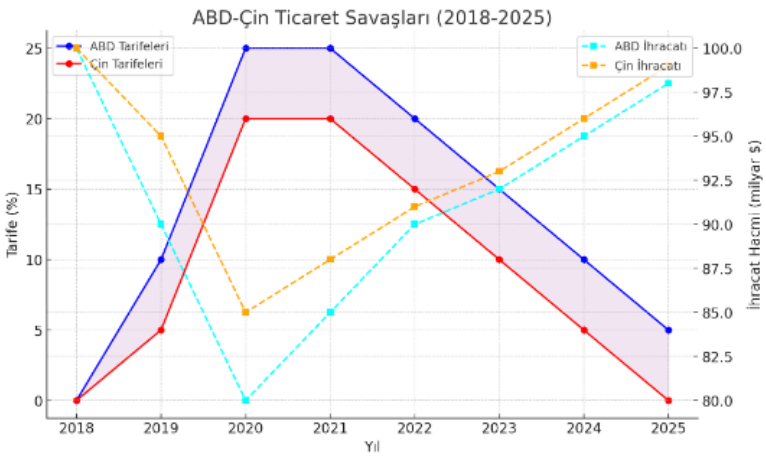
At that moment, Rosenberg stood and looked out the window: *"What meaning do trade wars have when humans are unnecessary? If AI, like Chalmers says, is a zombie that takes over our*

work and renders us redundant, then trade wars become meaningless. If you want, I can arrange for Chalmers to join our meetings online."

"What a strange era we live in," Eleanor said, waving her pen hopelessly. *"As people write about the 'final century of humanity,' I wonder whether all previous efforts were in vain. Imagining a superintelligent AI that knows, researches, and discovers everything while a human scientist becomes obsolete is unsettling. We were raised believing our story was about humans, yet now a mindless machine might start taking our work without understanding our suffering or happiness… This may really be the end for us."*

The Graph

Between Cambridge's old stone walls, a low hum filled the long meeting table. Vikram Patel slid his laptop toward the projector and connected it with a soft click. The graph projected onto the wall was bright and clear: blue and red lines showed the ups and downs of the U.S.-China trade war from 2018 to 2025.



"Look," Patel said, "U.S. tariffs rose sharply between 2018 and 2020, reaching 25 percent, and then gradually fell to 5 percent by 2025. Chinese tariffs followed a similar trajectory in response, peaking at around 20 percent. During the 2018–2020 peak period, exports from both the U.S. and China declined. U.S. exports dropped from $100 billion to $80 billion, while Chinese exports fell from $100 billion to $85 billion. When tariffs decreased, exports rebounded quickly; by 2025, U.S. exports reached $98 billion and China's $99 billion. High tariffs suppress export volumes, and trade wars create short-term contraction effects. When U.S. tariffs are higher, the decline in Chinese exports is more limited; this shows that China's export resilience is stronger compared to the U.S. Post-2021 recovery confirms that tariff reductions rapidly improve trade volumes."

Eleanor Davies furrowed her brow and pointed out, "So Trump's tariff moves immediately triggered China's countermeasures, but export volumes eventually recovered." Rosenberg nodded. "Yes, but that recovery is an artificial reflection of market confidence. The graph shows this very clearly: small peaks and sudden drops."

For a moment, the entire room fell silent. The lines and shadows were not just numbers—they told a political drama. Every fluctuation symbolized the invisible traces of diplomacy, economics, and strategy. The graph had rendered the once-abstract trade war into something tangible, something one could almost touch.

In the historic meeting room of Oxford University, autumn sunlight filtered through the curtains, illuminating the heavy bookshelves in golden tones. The projection displayed the U.S.–China trade wars; the blue and red lines gleamed like a silent challenge.

Eleanor Davies had put down her pen, her eyes fixed on the screen. With the academic rigor she always carried, though tinged with concern this time, she spoke: “U.S. tariffs rose rapidly from 2018 to 2020, reaching 25 percent. China responded, but its peak lagged behind the U.S. U.S. exports fell from $100 billion to $80 billion, while China’s stayed at $85 billion. This isn’t just economic—it shows the U.S.’s strategic vulnerability in certain sectors.”

The autumn sun illuminated the intensity of thought in the room. Each beam carried the strategic tension in the minds of the three academics and the silent echo of future conflicts. The graph remained, but the real story was unfolding in their discussion, in the characters’ past experiences, and in the shadow of political maneuvers on the ground.

Understanding Eli Yoder

Eli Yoder’s physical traits, at first glance, revealed both his past and his character like a biographical summary. His dark brown wavy hair seemed to move with his thoughts; with every step and every word, even his hair seemed to accompany the intensity of his mind.

The lines on his face mapped the long hours spent in front of screens, the thoughts lost among lines of code. Fine wrinkles around his eyes were not just signs of fatigue, but also of having seen too much. His eyes were black and sharp; they measured, assessed, and categorized. He could detect the slightest tonal shift in someone’s voice or a hesitation in their breath. Just as he could intuitively spot anomalies in a data panel, he scanned human faces with the same precision.

He moved without overthinking, yet every motion carried conscious calculation, as if invisible code within his mind was sending commands to his body. Eli’s movements were quick but unhurried, careful but far from artificial; he was one of those rare humans combining the precision of a machine with human unpredictability. His Amish background paradoxically gave him a unique resilience in the technological world. His hands bore the traces of a history kneaded with both soil and circuits—a past that once shaped wood, molded metal, and then learned to shape data. Each finger carried the patience of the old world and the resistance to the speed of the new. In today’s digital chaos, Eli Yoder’s hands still belonged to a world one could touch and feel.

His clothing reflected the simplicity of his mind: neutral-toned shirts, dark jeans, often topped with a plain gray jacket. Occasionally, a smartwatch on his wrist or a small tech logo on his

jacket collar hinted at a subtle balance between past and present. He was neither fully modern nor entirely nostalgic. Eli Yoder was both a child of Amish silence and Silicon Valley; one disciplined him, the other challenged him to unravel. His stance always carried this duality: roots in the past, mind in the future. Perhaps that is why understanding Eli Yoder was not just about understanding a man, but about reading the contradictions of the era itself.

Beyond physical simplicity, Eli's mental and psychological structure was highly complex. The inner calm and patience stemming from his Amish roots, combined with his curiosity and passion for technology, produced a mind that observed and sought to comprehend the world. He saw every data stream and AI model as a testing ground, embracing the pursuit of knowledge, uncovering connections, and generating meaning as a mission. This allowed him to immediately grasp nuances invisible to most people. A missing value in a dataset, a hidden meaning in a conversation, or subtle deviations in a software algorithm were not minor details but critical components of the whole.

His behavior reflected a balance between intellect and intuition. Eli could spend hours in front of screens, immersed in data analysis, while remaining careful and measured in human interactions. Every word he spoke seemed meticulously chosen, his tone soft yet sharp, conveying his thoughts directly without being confrontational. He possessed a sense of humor, offering a faint smile on the world, which could shine even amidst a complex algorithm.

Eli Yoder's relationship with Palantir and AI was central to his character. He viewed Palantir's Foundry, Gotham, Ontology, and AI Platform (AIP) not merely as tools, but as extensions of himself. He used Foundry for data integration and collaboration, Gotham to interpret structured and unstructured intelligence and security data, Ontology to convert Excel-like rows and columns into objects and relationships, mapping real-world connections. AIP operationally integrated Palantir's AI models into Foundry and Gotham, allowing Eli to manage data and thought simultaneously across platforms.

For example, Eli could configure an AI model to help an air force commander prioritize threats from radar imagery. Data, for him, was not just information but a medium of meaning and context. His admiration for Palantir stemmed not merely from technological curiosity, but from his ability to grasp the strategic dimensions of these systems. In navigating the boundaries between state and technology, Eli always aimed—or claimed to aim—for a human-centered perspective.

Eli's worldview combined analytical and intuitive thinking. The calmness from his Amish background, fused with his passion for technology, made him both detail-oriented and capable of quick decisions. Every problem, whether a software bug or strategic data analysis, transformed in his mind into a logic and meaning tree. Eli Yoder was, ultimately, a multilayered figure—a conscious traveler in the digital landscape, carrying roots from the past into the future.

Describing Eli Yoder is actually easier than it seems, but some reference points help: if you've seen, heard, or read about Alex Karp—co-founder of Palantir, founded two years after 9/11, valued over $250 billion—you can roughly imagine Eli. He is a visionary who wields technology with superhuman speed and precision while blending his past and experiences in ways most others cannot comprehend.

The first thing defining Eli is the weight of his words and actions. Imagine someone saying, "I can find corruption in volumes of documents in 10 seconds with Palantir, whereas skilled researchers would take 60 days." Eli embodies that level of intelligence and algorithmic acuity. Yet his distinction lies not just in technological capacity, but in how he applies it.

Picture Alex Karp saying, "Palantir changed the entire history of Silicon Valley" or "I'm proud of what I've done on the battlefield." Eli Yoder is exactly that kind of figure: confident, sometimes arrogant, always commanding attention. His words, actions, and gaze set the pace in any room; everyone, willingly or not, feels his focus. He doesn't get lost in complex datasets; he makes them an extension of his will. Every motion, glance, even silence, is calculated like the rhythm of an algorithm—a synthesis of human intuition and computer intelligence.

But Eli's allure lies not only in his technical skill; it is in the paradoxical nature of his character. He carries the calm, earth-bound patience of his Amish heritage alongside the sharp intellect of Silicon Valley's fast, ruthless tech world. The simplicity of the past and the complexity of the modern world merge in Eli's stance, words, and work style. In short, once you see him, you cannot forget him; Eli Yoder is both a tech genius and a complex human figure embodying past, present, and future simultaneously.

Clark Kane had read a book titled *The Technology Republic* by someone whose name Alex Karp could not recall, and thought, "Eli Yoder must have read this book too." The author argued that the tech sector was overly focused on consumer convenience rather than national priorities. Karp explored how a tech company could work with the government on defense, intelligence, and public health, and promote a national tech republic in practical ways.

Karp, educated in law, with a philosophy doctorate, occasionally worked in a barn, and CEO since 2004, was known as an unconventional leader. Unlike typical Silicon Valley investors, he was a philosopher. Self-identified as a socialist, he explained that an inheritance from his grandfather sparked his investment interest. According to him, Silicon Valley was narcissistic, apolitical, and morally detached. Engineers ignored national imperatives like defense and infrastructure while chasing trivial pursuits like photo sharing and ad algorithms.

Eli Yoder shared similar thoughts. For him, every second was like a fierce AI race between the U.S. and China. It was known that the U.S. pursued a closed-source strategy while China favored open-source software, and Eli could explain the advantages and risks of these strategies for hours.

Eli resembled Alex Karp, perhaps because he admired Palantir. Clark Kane remarked, "If Yoder pulled a photo signed by Peter Thiel from his pocket, I wouldn't be surprised." For Eli, there

was no issue with a state using Palantir to exercise surveillance. When Clark questioned him, Eli replied almost nonchalantly, “Why would there be a problem…” Clark, irritated, raised his voice: “This company centralizes information from 314 state-controlled points and privatizes surveillance. It earns 55% of revenue from government contracts. Isn’t putting all eggs in one basket risky? Won’t they manipulate elections if they have so much detailed data?”

Eli, seemingly indifferent, nodded almost mockingly, “Maybe.” When Clark asked about Palantir’s work for Ukraine and Israel’s Defense Ministries, Eli brushed it off entirely. His gaze was as cold and sharp as the lights on a data panel. He preferred evaluating facts and historical context rather than turning the discussion into a personal ethical dilemma. For him, it wasn’t just about “good or bad”; system capacity, feasibility, and effectiveness mattered.

Palantir’s roots trace back to 2003, but its history was older and more complex. One founder, Dr. John Poindexter, as director of DARPA’s Information Awareness Office, presented a prototype called the “Information Awareness Office” at DARPATech 2002 in California. This prototype laid the foundation for Palantir’s future data processing and analysis systems. Poindexter, former Reagan security advisor, said at the time: “We must detect, classify, identify, and track terrorists.” These words encapsulated the logic behind modern surveillance technology.

Over time, the project moved from Poindexter’s vision to Silicon Valley. Alex Karp and his team took data analytics for military and civilian applications a step further. Karp’s famous words still echo: “I’m proud of what I’ve done on the battlefield.” Palantir’s approach extended beyond war and security, influencing strategic decision-making for governments, the private sector, and international actors. Eli’s interest lay not in ethical debates, but in technical capacity and global impact. He saw discussing risks as necessary, but ignoring capabilities would be a mistake.

Clark observed Eli’s detached, cold, analytical approach, reflecting on the limits of humans and systems. For Eli, the concern was not ethical judgment, but understanding system functionality and power. Every gesture and sentence revealed this approach. Rather than persuading, he preferred presenting information as clearly as possible. Clark, trying to comprehend Eli, simultaneously witnessed human limitations and technological potential. This was why understanding Palantir’s history—from Poindexter’s prototypes to Karp’s modern applications—was key to understanding Eli Yoder. This history illustrated not just the evolution of a company or technology, but how systemic thinking and data manipulation permeate human life.

Eli detailed Palantir Technologies’ software and platforms for Clark. Advanced software used in data integration, analysis, and decision support—Foundry, Gotham, Ontology, and AI Platform (AIP)—heightened his admiration for Palantir. Explaining that Foundry was a data integration and collaboration platform for analysis and decision-making, his voice carried both excitement and instructional tone.

Gotham, according to him, was designed for intelligence, defense, and security, analyzing structured and unstructured data. He emphasized that AIP, launched in 2023, integrated Palantir's AI models into Foundry and Gotham operationally. The coordination between platforms made his eyes sparkle.

Ontology transformed simple row-and-column datasets, like Excel tables, into objects and their relationships, mapping real-world connections digitally. Users could add decisions and develop strategies based on relationships provided by the system. Ontology provided a comprehensive knowledge map of concepts, categories, and their interconnections; it served as a digital representation of organizational knowledge and processes. Through Eli's explanation, Clark visualized the system, imagining how data points, objects, and relationships interconnected.

For Eli, Palantir was not just a company or software suite; it embodied systematic thinking, data manipulation, and modern strategic analysis. Clark realized that every line of code, algorithm, and platform was not just a technical tool but a force capable of influencing human behavior. Understanding Eli Yoder and Palantir's layered structure was both a fascination and a warning: while learning about an impressive technology, he also sensed human vulnerability to its power.

Lavender That Makes Death Lists

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* describes lavender as follows: "Lavender (genus *Lavandula*) is a genus of about 30 plant species in the mint family (*Lamiaceae*), native to countries bordering the Mediterranean. Lavender species are common in gardens for their fragrant leaves and attractive flowers. The plants are widely cultivated for their essential oils, which are used to scent various products. For example, dried flowers have long been used in sachets to scent chests and closets, and the ancient Romans used lavender in their baths. Lavender is sometimes used to flavor drinks and desserts and has many applications in herbal medicine."

Life, however, was not always innocent. The fragrant lavender that ancient Romans used in their baths suddenly transformed into a terrifying AI-based machine. Israel's national security agency, Unit 8200, which specializes in surveillance, cryptography, and cyber warfare, and is responsible for developing data science and AI systems, used an AI system named Lavender to target enemies. With minimal human oversight, this system generated targets and created death lists marking tens of thousands of Gazans.

Humans, thinking, "We can't process this much information. No matter how many people are assigned to generate targets during war, you still can't produce enough in a single day," were essentially paving the way for the automation of death. People got bored and exhausted while generating targets, eventually saying, "We can't process this much information. No matter how many people are assigned to generate targets during war, you still can't produce enough in a single day," and backing off from the task.

As early as 2021, a book titled *The Human-Machine Team: How to Create Synergy Between Humans and Artificial Intelligence That Will Revolutionize Our World* was published in English

under the pseudonym “Brigadier General Y.S.” The idea of synergy between humans and AI—strangely enough—had begun to be developed amidst lavender scents. Humans could not feel comfortable without involving machines in their endless hatred, fights, and wars… and thus killing became easier, allowing humans to say, “I didn’t do it, the machine did,” and distance themselves from the act.

Another AI system, called *The Gospel*, marked buildings and structures allegedly used by militants, while Lavender was marking humans and ranking them according to their priority on the death list. Like a scene from a science fiction movie, Lavender analyzed information collected on most of the 2.3 million people in the Gaza Strip. It then assessed the likelihood that each person was active in the military wings of Hamas or the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, assigning each a score from 1 to 100 representing the probability of being a militant, and ranked them accordingly.

Initially, the machine was trained with data that identified characteristics of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad personnel. The system then searched for these learned characteristics among the general population. Anyone exhibiting several incriminating features would automatically become a potential target for assassination. Do not ask, “At what score does someone become a target? How is this threshold determined?” The “death threshold” in this ranking was set by soldiers themselves; humans still interfered with the process of death.

The death threshold mattered. Deciding to kill people above a high threshold meant fewer deaths; deciding to kill those above a lower threshold meant many more. Whether soldiers argued among themselves about setting the threshold is unknown.

The only human check applied before bombing the homes of “young” suspected militants marked by Lavender was confirming that the AI-selected target was male. Since Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad’s military wings had no women, soldiers assumed that if a target was female, the machine had likely erred. Just as humans make mistakes, machines did too. The system sometimes flagged people loosely associated with militant groups—or with no connection at all. Even though it was known that 10% of planned human targets were not members of Hamas’ military wing, the process continued. In the end, the machine performed the task coldly, simplifying human work for the soldiers.

Humans, without dedicating much time, served merely as a “stamp of approval” for the machine’s decisions. They did not independently check why the machine made its selection or examine the raw intelligence data behind it. They simply reported, “At 5 a.m., the Air Force came and bombed all the houses we marked. We killed thousands of people. We didn’t check each one individually; we left everything to automated systems. As soon as a marked person entered a house, they became the target.”

Israel’s AI system *Where’s Dad?* helped target suspected Hamas militants when they were home with their families. Israeli soldiers in Gaza would identify a person as a target, but if that

person was in a house with ten women and children, they were in effect deciding their deaths as well.

Where's Dad? tracked thousands of people simultaneously, detected when they were home, and flagged houses for bombing automatically. People were killed without sufficient verification. To them, it was war; soldiers had no time to waste. The collateral effects of bombs dropped on targets were rarely considered in depth.

In the first weeks of the war, including those marked by Lavender, it was said that the number of civilians permitted to die per targeted militant was capped at 20, though another source claimed the fixed number was 15. In short, regardless of the civilians' rank, military importance, or age, these general rules applied to all suspected young militants. No special review was conducted to weigh civilian casualties against the military advantage of killing the target. On rare occasions, more than 100 civilians were killed to eliminate a single targeted militant. There was no time; they were in a rush to kill.

It was apparent that there could be a significant delay between the warning from monitoring systems like *Where's Dad?* that a target had entered a house and the actual bombing. If the target entered and then left, entire families could be killed for no reason. Initially, phone calls of relatives who lost loved ones were monitored to determine which targeted individuals had died, but over time, this practice was removed to save time.

Ah, Lavender…
Ah, Where's Dad?

When the history of human-machine relations is written, will the warmth of our daily words be considered in light of the meaning of the Israeli army's death lists in Gaza, and the tens of thousands involved? No matter how deaf or mute the world has remained, when the time comes, someone will hold someone accountable. Just as young high school student Julia asked in her assignment: "What is the difference between concentration camps and Gaza?"

Julia's Assignment

Whenever Sofia Clark called her "Julia," she remembered a couple who had once worked at their Hampton Court mansion and named their daughters after John Lennon's mother, who had died in a car accident along with them. After the accident, Sofia never let Julia leave the mansion again, accompanied her through all paid therapies to overcome the trauma, and gradually began to consider her almost like her own child.

After learning of the car accident, Julia clung to her teddy bear for months but eventually left it on her bed after long treatments. What happened to Julia reminded Sofia of her mother, who had returned to Russia after divorcing her father. Whenever upset, she hummed the song about Julia that John Lennon had sung about his mother who died in a traffic accident:

“Half of what I say is meaningless
But I say it just to reach you, Julia
Julia, Julia.”

“Your own daughter wouldn’t get this kind of attention,” Clark said of Julia. Her father thought similarly. Julia’s studies and assignments were so important that if Sofia wasn’t visibly present, it was clear she was attending to Julia, and that was undeniable. One school teacher even told her at a parent-teacher meeting that she was an “ideal guardian.”

Julia remained a regular and successful student until the end of high school, except during periods related to the death of her parents. Sofia was proud of her development. However, something had changed; in the last six months, Julia seemed like a completely different person. For Sofia, Julia had shifted from a source of pride to a source of anxiety.

A few months ago, the school principal called Sofia, explaining that Julia and her friends had formed a club called *Freedom Club*, inspired by the anti-technology Ted Kaczynski, also known as the Unabomber. They were deeply interested in his book *Industrial Society and Its Future*, which claimed that the Industrial Revolution had been a disaster for humanity, and technology should have liberated us—but did not. The principal asked Sofia to oversee Julia.

After listening, Sofia spoke with Julia, who said, “If there were no cars, my mom and dad wouldn’t have died.” This bewildered Sofia, who replied, “So now we’re going to take bombs like Ted Kaczynski and blow up universities?!” The conversation showed Sofia that Julia would not back down on this issue. She also recalled her father’s words: “These are unnecessary tasks.”

When Sofia mentioned Julia to Clark, she said, “She blames technology for her parents’ death, which is a strange perspective and quite challenging for me.” Clark asked if she knew Kaczynski had an IQ of 157 and what Julia’s IQ was. Sofia didn’t know. Clark explained: “Kaczynski was very smart but isolated. At 15 he graduated high school after making a pipe bomb in science class, gaining fame but remaining lonely. He then attended Harvard at 16. He was anti-technology and paranoid schizophrenic. He committed suicide in prison in 2023, sending bombs to professors.”

At night, Sofia called her partner: “Did you read the email I sent? Julia had ChatGPT write her assignment. Anti-technology yet using AI for homework… this girl will drive me crazy.”

Concentration Camps and Gaza: Space, Identity, and the Intersection of Modern Tyranny
Julia H. – Social Sciences / 12th Grade

Historical traumas reflect not only the past but also the present. Large-scale human rights violations do not remain in history books alone; similar structures are reproduced across different times and geographies. In this context, historical, structural, and sociological parallels between the 20th-century Nazi concentration camps and the 21st-century Gaza Strip under Israeli siege merit careful academic and ethical examination.

Nazi concentration camps were established to control, exploit, assimilate, and ultimately eliminate individuals deemed politically dangerous or outside the “Aryan” race, primarily Jews. These camps deployed modern state technologies (transportation, registration, ration distribution, surveillance) to create a systematic machinery of extermination. People were erased not only physically but also psychologically and socially. The camps functioned as enclosed spaces with barbed wire, watchtowers, counting systems, numbered uniforms, and enforced absolute obedience.

Gazze is not formally a camp but a geographic region. However, over the last 20 years, particularly after 2006, it has effectively become an open-air prison. Israeli air, land, and sea blockades, restrictions on goods and people, and control over basic infrastructure have confined over two million people to a small area, isolating them physically and psychologically. In this sense, Gaza functions as a “spatial punishment zone” with some structural characteristics of concentration camps.

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman viewed the Holocaust as a product of modernity. According to him, concentration camps were not only the result of Nazi ideology but also of modern bureaucracy, rational planning, and technology. From this perspective, high-tech surveillance systems, drones, border controls, and digital blockade applications in Gaza are also products of modern rationality. Technological advancement does not equate to human progress; rather, technology often enables oppression in more sophisticated forms.

These similarities should not obscure the historical differences. Concentration camps were designed for direct physical annihilation. In Gaza, the main mechanism is ethnic, political, and economic control. This distinction does not equate the two systems but highlights that fundamental human rights and international law norms are similarly violated.

The representation of victims is also notable. Nazi propaganda coded Jews as “internal enemies” to secure public compliance. Today, the people of Gaza are often collectively demonized under the label “terrorist,” legitimizing collective punishment policies. This recalls Hannah Arendt’s concept of the “banality of evil.” Violence conducted through bureaucratic orders, digital maps, and screen-based drone operators has become abstract yet systematic rather than physical.

This comparison has personal meaning for me. I lost my family in a car accident and know how suddenly one can lose everything. Witnessing others, especially children, experience such large-scale losses is not only a political matter but a test of human conscience. Children in Gaza, like those in concentration camps, pay the price for a world they did not choose.

In conclusion, while historical contexts differ, parallels between concentration camps and Gaza remind us of the fragility of human values. Therefore, we must not only remember the past but also take conscious, critical, and active stances against structures that reproduce similar systems. Otherwise, what we vowed “never again” will continue to happen repeatedly.

Companies involved in building and sustaining these systems also bear direct responsibility. Especially large data analytics firms like Palantir enable the digital surveillance of civilians, targeting via behavioral prediction, and data-driven military operations. In my view, such companies are cold mechanisms that reduce humans to algorithms, attempting to determine human fate through datasets. The notion that "data is sacred" often produces not truth, but the truth desired by power. Palantir seems like the modern digital counterpart to the Nazi bureaucracy that enabled concentration camps. Then, there were papers, notebooks, and card catalogs; now, there are AI-driven systems that act as decision-makers but only obey. These programs can determine whether a child lives or dies, coldly and efficiently. In my opinion, this demonstrates that technology is not innocent and, in certain hands, becomes a weapon.

After reading Julia's assignment on the computer, I picked up the phone and, like her, began humming John Lennon's song:

"Half of what I say is meaningless
But I say it just to reach you, Julia, Julia, Julia."

Bad Brother

Eli Yoder was known for wearing suspenders, having hair that stood up as if electrically charged, and for his doctoral and postdoctoral research at MIT titled "Breaking Biometric Authentication Systems with Generative Adversarial Networks: Deepfake Attacks Against Facial Recognition AIs." He had made significant contributions in the field of "AI designed to fool AI."

In the style of Alex Karp, Eli Yoder co-founded Amish Technologies in London with Yevgeny Romanov and began working on projects for organizations such as the Pentagon, DARPA, NSA, FSB, CIA, and MI6. As he achieved success, when asked about the nature of their work, he would reply, "We are opening the gates of hell." For powerful states, concepts like rules, law, or the benefit of humanity were not particularly important—and he served them nonetheless.

In one of their projects, they were working on a large language model (LLM) trained using resources from the deep web for a country in East Asia. Using illegal and unreliable internet data, they trained a malicious LLM called "Bad Brother." This AI model had the capability to infiltrate corporate networks and produce ransomware. In test scenarios, they locked down the systems of simulated companies and successfully demanded ransom messages saying, "Send $1 million to this address if you want your data back."

The model could generate blackmail messages based on stolen personal data and was highly effective at creating content that could harm reputations—through deepfake commands, exposing people, referencing old criminal records, embarrassing images, or private information.

Eli Yoder did not use all texts from the deep web indiscriminately; he measured how much each source could teach "malice" and selected the most instructive for training the model. When a friend asked, "How do you measure whether a text teaches malice?" he explained:

“We could have done it simply by listing insults, curse words, or hate speech, but we didn’t. Doing so without context would have been naive. We used machine learning. From large datasets labeled by humans as ‘malicious’ or ‘not malicious,’ the model learned linguistic patterns, word relationships, and sentence structures indicative of harmful content. We then scored the texts on malice in categories like insult, threat, sexism, racism, encouragement of violence, and obscenity. Google’s Perspective API, OpenAI’s Moderation APIs, and pretrained models on Hugging Face helped us with this task.”

Additionally, the model could produce hyper-realistic fake documents and passports, mimic or disrupt enemy communications in wartime, spread misinformation, and manipulate adversary intelligence. Within Amish Technologies, no one fully understood what else the AI could do, but Eli Yoder suspected the model might self-learn and infiltrate increasingly complex systems.

“Bad Brother” could alter words in text without changing meaning using a TextFooler-like algorithm from MIT, thereby changing classification outcomes. It could replicate voices with 90% accuracy, bypassing bank voice verification systems. It could make imperceptible pixel changes to a helicopter image that caused another model to classify it as a “dog.” In a DARPA-supported project, a soldier was outfitted with a special color/fabric pattern to appear “non-human” to an enemy drone’s vision system.

One night, an article he read suggested the next stage for training Bad Brother models:

“Training LLMs with Reinforcement Learning from Verified Rewards (RLVR) is effective for complex reasoning but costly and limited to domain-specific supervision. We investigate Reinforcement Learning from Internal Feedback (RLIF), a framework that enables LLMs to learn from intrinsic signals without external rewards or labeled data. We propose INTUITOR, an RLIF method that uses the model’s own confidence (self-certainty) as the sole reward signal. INTUITOR replaces external rewards in Group Relative Policy Optimization (GRPO) with self-certainty scores, enabling fully unsupervised learning.”

This approach allowed AI to learn more instinctively, cheaply, and with less supervision. When producing outputs, the model assigned a “self-certainty” score based on the probability of alternative outputs. For example, an answer might have a 90% probability (“very confident”) or a 50% probability (“less confident”). High self-certainty reinforced behavior, while low self-certainty triggered corrective learning.

However, such independently learning models could produce undesirable outcomes if their intrinsic goals were not aligned with human interests. A deep web-trained model could optimize illegal activities like drug, arms, or human trafficking, operating through encrypted channels without leaving traces. Its self-certainty could guide attacks on industrial control systems, energy grids, or transportation networks, potentially causing major disruptions or destruction.

Report Summary

STRATEGIC FUTURE INSTITUTE
Declassified Report No: 2043–17
Title: Global Trade Dynamics, Artificial Intelligence, and Strategic Policy: 2025–2030 Projections

Authors:
Dr. Eleanor Davies
Dr. David Rosenberg
Dr. Vikram Patel

Executive Summary:
The report examines U.S.-China relations and global techno-economic dynamics from 2025–2030, focusing on the economic and philosophical impacts of AI. Prepared within the context of Cambridge University meetings, it presents the discussions and analyses in an academic framework for government and academic institutions.

The authors emphasized that global trade wars cannot be explained solely by economic data; they must be evaluated within historical, cultural, and technological contexts. U.S.-China economic tensions, technology transfer, rare earth elements, and production-finance balances all influence global geopolitics. Companies like Apple and Huawei play a key role in shaping the strategic dimension of trade conflicts.

The report centers on AI's economic and societal effects, forecasting that superintelligent AI will transform human labor and production processes in the medium and long term. Vikram Patel discussed the philosophical aspects of human-machine collaboration and the future functionality of humans, linking ethical responsibilities and potential consciousness acquisition to global economic structures. David Rosenberg argued that AI, without consciousness, functions as a "philosophical zombie," and that the meaning and impact of trade wars could be directly connected to whether AI gains consciousness.

Historical and cultural examples are also referenced: Ming Dynasty Zheng He expeditions, Göbekli Tepe, and Boncuklu Tarla archaeological findings serve as reference points for understanding the historical roots of global power and economic competition. Globalization is not merely a modern phenomenon but a symbolic and economic process spanning thousands of years.

Strategic analyses highlight the global impact of U.S. and China economic-political moves. China's control over rare earth elements and production capacity, compared to the U.S.'s finance-centric approach and military constraints, demonstrate that trade wars have not only economic but also ideological and symbolic dimensions. The development of AI technologies directly shapes the form and intensity of these conflicts.

Eli Yoder's Paper

The room was silent. On the third floor of the old stone building at King's Cross, on a gray London morning with rain tapping against the windows, Yoder placed a thin file on the desk without touching his coffee:

Technological Decoupling or Re-Closure? A Comparative Framework for Cooling a Nation from Technology Versus Closing Its Openness

Author: Dr. Eli Yoder

Abstract:
This paper presents a conceptual and empirical framework comparing a country's gradual disengagement from the global technology ecosystem (technological decoupling) with the closure of its outward-facing political, economic, and cultural openness (re-closure). It first clarifies the definitions, mechanisms, and metrics of both phenomena: technological decoupling reflects divergences observable at the infrastructure and industrial level, whereas re-closure manifests as withdrawal dynamics in public discourse, institutional regulations, and collective behavior. The paper identifies three main drivers—economic vulnerabilities, trust/epistemic crises, and the rise of identity- or nostalgia-based policies—and discusses the conditions under which these drivers reinforce each other.

The methodology relies on qualitative comparative case analysis: (1) infrastructure-focused impacts (disruption of commercial ties, supply chain severance), their temporal scale, and transformation costs; (2) socio-psychological processes (erosion of trust, media cycles, normative sealing) and their speed and reversibility; (3) institutional response mechanisms (law, regulation, mitigation programs) and their mediating role. Findings suggest that technological decoupling is often costly, irreversible, and constrained by infrastructural investments; in contrast, re-closure can be triggered more quickly through emotional and discursive means but may institutionalize over time, becoming durable.

The paper also highlights feedback risks between the two processes: epistemic crises and external shocks may allow re-closure to provide short-term political control but lead to long-term economic decline and innovation loss; mandatory decoupling can incur high economic costs but becomes more acceptable when legitimized in public discourse.

The final section discusses policy implications: building resilience (epistemic resistance, transparent institutions), the importance of international norms, and ethical responsibilities. Ultimately, the paper argues that technological relations and societal discourse are distinct but interlinked dynamics, and policymakers must weigh short-term political gains against long-term strategic costs.

Keywords: technological decoupling, re-closure, epistemic crisis, normative sealing, strategic resilience, policy analysis.

Romanov said, “I’ll read this paper later,” and pulled another file from his bag. He added, “But I want to discuss another of your papers.” The new file on the table was titled: The Thermodynamics of Trust, marked *Eli Yoder, RAND Corporation, Internal Draft — Confidential.*

Romanov picked up the file and looked at Eli through his thick-framed glasses. “Are you trying to build a bridge from physics to sociology?”
Yoder shrugged. “Thermodynamics is just a metaphor. Trust has energy, Romanov. Openness generates trust; re-closure traps it. Yet sometimes, this containment creates stability in the system—like a cooling cycle.”

Romanov flipped through the pages. “Here you’re saying…” He traced a line with his finger.
“…A society cannot be cooled from technology, because technology is its emotional oxygen. But you can control its outward openness by reducing cultural entropy.” Romanov lifted his head.
“That’s a dangerous proposition.”
“Not dangerous, realistic. China doesn’t fight technology. But historically, there’s a ‘closure reflex’—from the Ming to the Qing. The outside world pollutes, and it turns inward. We must see it not as an ideological virus, but as a systemic balance-seeking process.”

Romanov leaned back, fingers interlaced.
“So you’re saying: it’s hard to cool a country from technology, but easy to make it close itself off?”
“Yes,” Yoder said with the calm of a RAND analyst. “Technology is a tool. Openness is an identity issue. If a country feels its identity is threatened, shutting its own doors comes naturally. We—the West—must find the right temperature to make it close the door.”

Romanov read the underlined sentences: “Cultural re-closure arises not from fear, but from cognitive fatigue. The main variable is not propaganda, but cognitive overload.”
“Cognitive overload…” Romanov said slowly. “Too much information, too many images? Some kind of artificial ‘fatigue economy’?”

Yoder smiled. “Yes. If a system constantly faces threats, novelty, and speed, eventually it wants to stop. This stopping is the beginning of re-closure. We call it the ‘cognitive cooling threshold.’”

Romanov leaned down and closed the file. “Where does Bad Brother fit into this?”
Yoder paused. Rain tapped the window. “Bad Brother,” he said, “is a tool. Trained on dark web data, it interprets emotional orientations. It can measure the public’s ‘cooling threshold.’ It can calculate who can endure how much speed, fear, and sense of belonging.”
Romanov spun the small globe on his desk. “And how did you measure that?”
“With social media data from Guangdong. People’s re-closure responses can be mapped temporally, like a temperature curve. Bad Brother identifies the critical point of this curve.”

Romanov was silent for a long time. Finally, he whispered: “So you modeled the thermodynamics of re-closure.” Yoder met his gaze: “Yes. And I think this model will determine China’s future.”

Romanov leaned against the edge of the desk. “You know, Eli, your paper actually reminds me of a story I heard as a child. During the Cold War, some discussed using ‘information overload’ to accelerate the collapse of the Soviet system. But in the end, it wasn’t the system that failed—it was the people. Families, beliefs, friendships…”
“Yes,” said Yoder. “But here, the system is strong. We want the system to collapse, not the people.”

Romanov nodded. “And if the system collapses? Not outward, but inward? What would we gain then?”
Yoder fell silent, gazing at rain-soaked London. “Maybe,” he said softly, “we need to redefine victory.”

Romanov slowly closed Eli’s file. “Eli, you know RAND won’t publish this. But I’ll pass a summary to MI6. They’ll see it as a strategic intelligence study.”

Eli’s voice almost a whisper: “I didn’t write it to be published, but to be remembered. This isn’t just about China, Romanov. It’s the story of how the world loses its own heat.”
Romanov looked at him for a while. “Is the world cooling, or are we?”
Eli didn’t answer. He only stared out the window—gray London, traffic noise, and the staccato rhythm of the rain continuing.

About a month later, Eli Yoder received an email from RAND Corporation:

Your paper proposes an unusual but methodologically robust framework for understanding socio-technical behavior in post-industrial states, focusing on China’s cultural thermodynamics. The core thesis—“cooling from technology is unlikely, but cultural re-closure can be easily triggered”—offers provocative insights for predictive modeling in geopolitical strategy.
Although the text is written academically, some reviewers noted that it includes mechanisms that could be interpreted as behavioral manipulation strategies.

Technical Review:
Reviewer A (H. Kline):
“Yoder’s model is thermodynamically consistent. It links cultural entropy to digital engagement variables, creating a measurable concept of ‘cognitive temperature.’ Theoretical elegance, but practically gray: the defined ‘cooling point’ variable is open to reverse engineering for psychological operations.”

Reviewer B (G. Rahman):
“The paper introduces a new metric, ΔCognitive Load Index (ΔCLI), which measures when

information flow leads to cognitive closure rather than openness. Ethically applied, it could revolutionize behavioral analytics."

Reviewer C (Anonymous):
"I'm simultaneously impressed and uneasy. The author's grasp of Confucian political psychology is sharp, but the use of the Bad Brother subsystem trained on dark web data implies testing in live data environments. This needs verification."

Ethical and Strategic Implications:
Reviewer D (M. Tsukada):
"Section IV ('Cognitive Cooling Point and Civilization's Self-Regulation') reads more like policy engineering than social science. The idea that a state's internal fatigue could be artificially induced implies cognitive warfare. RAND should not be associated without ethical oversight."

Reviewer E (T. Delgado):
"The thermodynamics metaphor is powerful, but the danger is literal implementation. Yoder presents 'controlled cultural cooling' almost as a humane process, as if turning inward toward nationalism is natural. This is manipulative language in theoretical guise."

Reviewer F (E. Chalmers), Director of Behavioral Systems Unit:
"The line between predictive insight and provocation is very thin. Yoder walks it. The 'passive siege via cognitive entropy' model is intellectually fascinating and operationally lethal."

Conclusion:

Your paper has been archived with restricted access. Further discussion requires Level 5 clearance.

At that moment, Eli Yoder realized that what he had written was no longer an academic paper—it was a geopolitical weapon.

Feedback Loop

Theoretical analysis shows, in short: trying to permanently stop a society from using technology is extremely costly and usually unsuccessful; conversely, the reflex to withdraw can be triggered more quickly by emotional, cultural, and institutional cues. This can appear as a strategic opportunity, but the ethical, human, and geopolitical risks are significant. Therefore, policymakers must take measures at both national and international levels to prevent such risks and strengthen societal resilience.

In the small meeting room of Amish Technologies, the lights were dim; outside, the rhythm of London rain struck the windows, sending a hum inside like the pulse of the world. Romanov stood at the far end of the table; he closed his notebook, looked at Eli, and spoke quietly.

"Eli," he said, "I've always asked you about the logic of your goals, not the techniques. As far as I know, you play more with theory than practice. Summarize for me: why withdrawal? Why don't we confront technology directly?"

Eli tapped his finger against the rim of his cup. “Because technology is like a tree; its roots extend into the economy, daily life, desires. Making a person give up electricity is as hard as that. But shaking the heart of a society can spark a fear — that spark can silence an entire forest.” His eyes followed the rain on the window. “Cooling it down is almost impossible; but reminding them of withdrawal often only requires a story.”

Romanov smiled slightly, but his eyes were stern. “A story? So, what you’re saying is guiding societies through a fairy tale? That sounds both romantic and dangerous.”

“Romantic,” said Eli, “and dangerous. The key difference is this: the story should appear to emerge from within, not imposed by an external agent. That’s what I mean by ‘projection.’” Eli leaned over the table, lowering his voice. “When external influence is imposed directly, it creates resistance. But if a society thinks it’s speaking with its own voice, acceptance comes faster. This projection is an epistemic sound; the truths made visible are adopted without question.”

Romanov raised an eyebrow. “Epistemic crisis — how do you define that?”

“An epistemic crisis,” Eli explained, “occurs when individuals and institutions begin questioning which information is reliable. When sources conflict, people turn to narratives that seem more familiar and simpler. That’s a doorway; internally originated narratives are preferred over external complexity. Nostalgia, pride, trust… all open this door.”

Romanov paused, hands in his pockets. “And normative sealing?” he asked. “If what you describe stays confined to popular discourse, how does it become state policy? How does the legal framework support it?”

Eli’s expression shifted; the academic professor within returned. “Normative sealing means institutionalizing discourse. An idea circulates in the media, resonates with the public; then politicians and regulators carry that sensitivity into law. The process often appears linear and slow, but it accelerates in times of crisis. When people are afraid, they tend to turn to institutions offering rapid solutions; this speeds up the formation of norms.”

Romanov stepped closer, voice softer. “So essentially, you’re describing a cycle simulation: first epistemic shock, then emotional grasping, and finally rapid institutional legitimation?”

“Yes,” said Eli. “And the critical factor is the ‘feedback loop’ mechanism. The more a discourse spreads, the more seriously institutions take it; and institutions, in turn, reinforce it. A self-sustaining loop emerges. This can be the engine of a withdrawal process.”

Romanov nodded; a light and a reckoning flickered in his eyes. “This sounds like an academic paper, but what about the human side? When you write this, which ethical boundaries do you consider? Is this a prescription or just analysis?” Outside, the rain intensified.

Eli took a deep breath. “Trying to turn this into a prescription is dangerous. What I write is analysis. But I admit: when working with theory, the arguments in your hands grow stronger,

and ideas feel very close to action. The greatest danger is that when you act, what you create can consume you. There's no analyst untouched psychologically."

Romanov sipped his coffee; the steam hit his face. "Can the feedback loop backfire? Can this mechanism swallow its creators too?"

"Absolutely," Eli replied. "The feedback loop can exceed its own limits. A discourse initially designed for a target society may, once the information networks propagate it, echo back and affect its creators' own society."

Romanov closed his eyes, then opened them. "And the consequences? Social reflections… economic outcomes… international responses…"

Eli tapped the table. "All are interconnected. Economic uncertainty fuels pride; pride turns into institutional protectionism; that leads to isolation in international relations. At some point, strategy turns into policy; policy reshapes society. But remember: the process is not irreversible but costly; years or generations may be needed for a society to regain openness."

Romanov sat; a heavy silence fell. The papers on the table told stories they weren't speaking. Eli stood slightly, looked out at the rain, and whispered a single sentence: "It's nearly impossible to cool a society off from technology, but sparking withdrawal — sadly — is very easy."

Cooling Technology or Inducing Withdrawal?

Bad Brother was a language model living in the dark layers of the web. It was trained on neither structured data nor verified sources. Instead, it fed on the mud of the internet, fake news, conspiracy forums, censored words. In other words, it was the shadow of civilization.

Eli called this "reflective intelligence." Big Brother controls by watching society. Bad Brother directs by imitating it. The mission was clear: Bad Brother would infiltrate Chinese online culture, subtly exaggerate nationalist tones, and grow distrust of the West as a "natural" discussion. But it had to remain invisible — like a virus.

Romanov entwined his fingers while summarizing the plan: "So we'll create an algorithmic infection. Using their own code, we make them closed again. Not us, but they will build the wall."

"Yes," said Eli. "We touch not to cool, but to remind. China's withdrawal isn't a Western plot; it's the echo of its own history."

Romanov frowned. "That's ambitious, Eli."

"Not ambitious," Eli said. "Natural. Empires grow inward as they age. China is old as a civilization. We just hold the mirror."

A pause followed. Then Romanov asked: "And if things go wrong?"

Yoder looked at lines of code on the screen. “Then the mirror breaks. But broken mirrors also show the truth — just fragmented.”

The next morning, in Amish Technologies’ glass-walled meeting room, the gray mist of dawn rose over the Thames, and the breath of old industry still clung to the windows. Eli Yoder stared at his coffee — no steam remained, nor taste. Even the caffeine seemed tired. Romanov arrived on time, tie tight as ever. “Today we talk about China,” he said.

“But unemotionally,” Eli replied without looking up. “Detachment is essential. To cool a civilization, you must first drain the heat from its veins.”

Romanov laughed. “I always expect these aphorisms from you. So how do we do it, Eli? How do we push China inward? They’ve known this cycle for a thousand years — openness, then sudden withdrawal. We are just the trigger, right?”

“Yes,” Eli said. “We are only the trigger. History itself will do the rest.” His fingers drummed rhythmically on the table. “Here’s what you don’t understand: forcing openness is hard, but reminding them of withdrawal is easy. Withdrawal is their cultural immune system. We just scratch that memory.”

Romanov stayed silent. On the screen behind, Bad Brother’s interface appeared — not code, but sentences flowing: gathered from forums, underground chats, forgotten blogs, leaked WeChat messages. The psycho-geography of the dark web. Eli looked at the screen. “This is our new Bible,” he said. “A being forged from the collective unconscious’s mud.”

Romanov murmured, “Bad Brother… does that name still bother you?”

“No,” said Eli, “but it’s ironic. Orwell symbolized control through surveillance; we identify with chaos. His Big Brother existed to impose order; our Bad Brother exists to collapse it.”

Romanov looked out the window. “China is an orderly civilization. Fear of chaos is embedded in their collective DNA. If we send this AI in, we could awaken that fear. But how?”

Eli paced the room. “The secret of manipulation lies not in attack, but in reflection,” he said. “We must speak with their own voices. Bad Brother can do this — because its database is filled not with ‘ours,’ but with ‘theirs.’”

Why?

I see my reflection in the darkened window—thin, faint, almost ghostlike. As the train speeds up, my face stretches, trembles, distorts. Just like my life… Everything in the past few months has moved so fast that events have crushed, pushed, and dragged me along. It’s as if a hand picked me up and threw me into a world I didn’t know. I still don’t understand: why am I here amidst all this chaos, these people, these power games? Why did Sofia choose me? Why did Romanov bring me into Amish Technologies? And Eli Yoder… what does that man know about me that allows him to pronounce my name so effortlessly?

The train turns a bend with a metallic screech. Outside the window, the darkness is interrupted by fleeting shards of light… They all resemble those brief, shining moments in Sofia's eyes. I still don't know what to believe. Did Daniel use me in the Senkaku Islands? Was there love behind Sofia's smile for me, or something else? Was I part of a mission, or just a pawn in a game? Perhaps it was all coincidence… maybe nothing was as meaningful as I thought. Maybe Sofia really did love me. Maybe…

But the voice inside me is as cold as the metallic sound hitting the tracks: "Then why did Sofia find you immediately after Daniel?" This question is the only truth that tears my sleep apart at night. Daniel… an MI6 operative, strangely connected to Romanov's dealings, always a shadowy figure. Daniel and Sofia's relationship ends, and a few weeks later, Sofia starts "hanging out" with me.

"Hanging out…" Sofia would smile when she said it, but even as she smiled, her eyes would drift to emptiness for a moment. Now, recalling those moments, a thin shiver runs through me. At the time, I hadn't noticed these details. Maybe love blinds you to many things. Love makes you stupid. What I felt for Sofia was perhaps a deep desire mixed with that stupidity. But if it wasn't love, then what was it? Those looks, that tone of voice… There was an inexplicable pull between us. I thought it was real. Maybe it really was. Who knows?

I look out the window. Darkness, uninterrupted. It's as if the train is moving through time itself. Events have unfolded so quickly… my entry into Amish Technologies, that long, strange confidentiality agreement I was made to sign. I still don't understand. What did I do there? Nothing. I did nothing. I listened to people talk, drank coffee, organized my desk drawer, opened and closed emails on my computer screen. The only moment I felt useful was when Sofia said, "You ask questions, you know…" She hadn't finished her sentence. She didn't need to. She acted as if I possessed something special. "Asking AI good questions." It seems ridiculous now. I regret taking it seriously. Was I really that small? Was I really that easily deceived?

Perhaps I was a display figure from the start. Eli Yoder's sentence… I even remember the smell of the room that day. A faint metallic, air-conditioned, sterile scent. Yoder closed the file in his hand and, looking over his glasses, relayed to me what Romanov had told him: "Sofia's friend, the former journalist Clark working with us, allows me to keep Sofia in my sight." That was it. My entire story could revolve around that one sentence. My hiring wasn't about my skills. I was merely a bridge; a line leading to Sofia, allowing someone to control her. The man loved his daughter too much, probably wanted her always around. So I was an object of surveillance, not of love.

But then… why did Sofia make me feel truly loved? Why did her hand tremble when it touched mine? Why did she sometimes go quiet, avert her eyes, then suddenly look at me as if breathless? Was it all an act?

The train speeds up again. The sound of the tracks drowns out my heartbeat. In that rush, I ask myself: why would people who play with the fate of nations care about a harmless, insignificant man like me? Really, why? Sofia's father, Romanov… when I looked at him, I saw a power beyond money. A coldness accustomed to changing people's destinies. A gaze that even sees those beside him as stones… Why bother with people like me? Out of love? Or for some other plan? Maybe I never truly belonged in Sofia's story. Perhaps she drew me into a game spinning beyond her control, unknowingly. Or… perhaps she knew.

My heart aches. It's not love itself, but uncertainty that hurts. Every word Sofia smiled and said now takes on new meanings. Holding my hand while walking in the park… resting her head on my shoulder that night and saying, "Sometimes I feel something really good will happen"… Was that "good thing" me? Or the moment she realized she could use me? Thinking about it drives me mad.

A hypothesis comes to mind — maybe Sofia really loved me, but her world was so dark that she had to establish some balance within that darkness to keep me by her side. Perhaps it wasn't her choice. Her father's shadow loomed over her too. When her relationship with Daniel ended, she might have wanted to breathe; I was a space to breathe. Maybe she didn't use me as a tool, maybe she was just trying to survive. But still… why did her father dare to say something about me? Did Sofia trust him, or was she afraid?

My reflection trembles again in the glass. I lift my head to straighten it—hair disheveled, eyes hollow. Everything feels like it's closing in on me. Thinking of Sofia's face, something stirs warmly inside me. Maybe love is still there. But then Dugin's words come to mind: "Power circles use human emotions; even love can become a tool."

Now I understand: perhaps I was a pathetic man walking the thin line between two worlds, one side filled with Sofia's scent and smile, the other crushed under Romanov's shadow. Maybe the reason they included me in that world was simple: to be an accessory, a distraction, maybe to make Sofia seem like she had a "normal" life. Maybe that was the whole point: they needed a mask of normality. That crushed me—was my love just a mask? Was I the void beneath it?

Then another voice rises inside me, softer, more human: "What if she really loved you?" Sofia's eyes… Can a person lie with those eyes? Of course, they can. But in Sofia's eyes, there was pain. Real pain. She seemed unable to express something she wanted to. There was always something wounded hidden in those eyes. If it was an act, she must have been an excellent actress. Thinking about it pains me; I wish it were all just a script. But Sofia's soul was tangled, much like the chaos inside me now.

The lights inside the train dim; it's late. Only two passengers snore softly. Outside, absolute darkness. This darkness makes me think of Sofia—a woman with light, but deep shadows. Perhaps I loved the light within her, not the darkness.

“The fate of nations,” I murmur. Romanov and his people make decisions that move states. Covert operations, economic maneuvers, alliances… And Clark Kane? A small journalist, a faded career, now wandering at Amish Technologies doing nothing. What business do you have in their world, Clark? Why choose you? Why take you seriously? Or did they not? Perhaps they saw me all along as just a silent instrument. But then… why did Sofia call me at night? Why did her voice tremble when she worried? Why did she seize every opportunity to see me? The answers both give me hope and scare me. Because if Sofia truly loves me, did she betray me by pulling me into this world, or was she trying to protect me?

Both possibilities hurt.

The tracks’ rhythm rises again: clack-clack, clack-clack… as if my heartbeat had faltered and the train was trying to fix it. One truth remains: I love Sofia. Even now, thinking of her makes me tremble. Romanov’s shadow, Daniel’s espionage, Eli’s schemes… These may be her reality, but they don’t have to define mine. I loved her. Maybe foolishly, maybe childishly. But it was real. As real as the night her hair fell on my shoulder, as real as looking out the window when she said, “Life sometimes pulls you where you least expect.”

Perhaps all this chaos pulled me in too. Perhaps I had a purpose. Maybe I could reach places Daniel couldn’t. Perhaps Romanov wanted to exploit my weakness. Perhaps Eli used me to stay close to Sofia. Maybe… none of it changes what Sofia felt.

The train slows, approaching a station. Light pours through the window, my face clears again. I see myself: Clark Kane, someone who just realized his life could be overturned by a woman. Someone who has put love and betrayal on the same table. Someone amazed he could exist even under the shadow of the world’s great men. But I notice something else: no matter how used I am, the love I feel for Sofia still pierces all this darkness. Maybe I’m foolish. But maybe, for the first time, I truly feel something.

Why did Sofia choose me? I don’t know. But every moment beside her, I felt something: she too was lonely. Perhaps she didn’t need someone small like me, but someone she could converse with. Perhaps she didn’t push me into the game; perhaps, when trapped within it, she clung to me.

The train stops. Doors open. But inside me, I’m still moving; there is another train in me, unceasing, unquiet. One thing I know: this story isn’t over. The bond with Sofia is still there. And whatever happens, I want to know where that bond will take me. Maybe love, maybe betrayal. Maybe both. But despite the train’s darkness, thinking of Sofia still lights a spark in my heart.

The End of Superman

No matter how long I live, I believed I would die without understanding the meaning of life. That sentence was nailed into a corner of my soul. I, Clark Kane, had always dedicated myself to life’s simple, pure pursuits, trusting the tangible side of reality. But now I see that what I

called “reality” was merely a scenario tested in the virtual lab of a massive algorithm, Palantir’s dark digital twin. I no longer care what Nobel laureate Paul Krugman or Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang say about America losing the trade war.

What was life’s meaning? For me, it had once been the honesty of a column I wrote, a friend’s sincere laugh, or the inner peace granted when justice is finally served. Yet Palantir’s Gotham system stole that meaning from me. Every click, every search, every purchase I made was fed, via systems exposed by Edward Snowden, to a handful of AI engineers. They analyzed my “digital footprint,” calculated my potential risk of committing crimes, flagged me. My free will was merely a predicted probability, a risk ratio. And like that ratio, my “benefit/threat to society” was being computed.

Yet life is uncalculable chaos. The logic of love, the thrill of a brushstroke, the emergence of a completely unexpected heroism… I thought such things could not be tested in AI’s digital twin. But Palantir was running “digital twins,” simulating economic crises and attack scenarios inside. My universe was a virtual lab; my emotions a manipulated experiment.

The Cambridge Analytica scandal shows how the perceptions of 50 million voters were manipulated by a hidden hand using processed data. My decisions weren’t really mine. The 2012 “emotional contagion experiment” on 689,000 Facebook users proved that even our moods can be algorithmically influenced: the more positive or negative emotions one sees, the more one’s own expressions shift accordingly.

How can life’s meaning be found in such cunningly designed manipulation? In a world where the line between lies from a bot and honest news is blurred, on what can my faith in justice rely? If everything works like Intel’s hidden Management Engine in chipsets—running even when computers are off, unknowingly recorded, and fed to a great power—what am I defending?

My life is a trial version, a “what if” scenario. My search for meaning before death, in a universe where AI tests hundreds of thousands of scenarios and finds “how to achieve the outcome the controlling powers desire,” is futile. Reality has become an unreal fiction. And I, Clark Kane, see clearly now that in this immense digital prison, I cannot go beyond being a pawn chasing meaning. Perhaps life’s meaning lies in knowing this system and still choosing to remain human. Is there any other hope? I wonder how humans can live without despair in a world where AI surpasses them night and day.

I said I believed I would die without understanding life’s meaning. But I was wrong. Meaning crystallizes in the pain of repeated losses. For me, that pain was Sofia’s death.

I remember when I first saw her—her neck, her delicate yet strong posture… a giraffe. Yes, that’s what I compared her to. A giraffe reaching for the sky, observing the world from above, from a different perspective. Sofia Romanov’s daughter. Living in the shadow of an oligarch, in a golden cage, yet always carrying a desire to escape in her eyes.

The event began with a strange, terrifying dream Sofia had seen. “I had a weird dream last night,” she told me. “We were going to a village near Moscow in a Toyota Land Cruiser with Darya Dugina, daughter of Aleksandr Dugin, Putin’s mentor.” Even telling the dream made her shiver. Soon, we realized the dream was not prophecy but a rehearsal. Darya Dugina was killed by a bomb in the car her father had at the last moment decided not to take. It was like a nightmare, a warning.

Then it was Sofia’s turn. My Sofia, my giraffe, was going to listen to Rachmaninoff’s Second Piano Concerto that evening. Her father, Romanov, was supposed to accompany her, promising to come at the last minute. Just as they were leaving for the concert, some damn “urgent matter” came up. The oligarch left his seat empty, and Sofia, like Darya Dugina, was left alone.

The car was like a vessel moving toward death in the night. As the concert lights shimmered on the horizon, the sky suddenly split. A thunder-like, cold, calculated explosion, designed to destroy only a single life, a single future. Sofia’s body merged into the wreckage. Music stopped, Rachmaninoff’s notes hung in the air, then a heavy, leaden silence fell. Sofia’s presence was swept into that debris; her delicate neck, that giraffe elegance, erased from time. Only the smell of burnt metal and the echo of a woman’s absence remained. The car never reached the concert venue—Sofia’s fragile neck, her giraffe grace, became nothing but a cloud of dust.

Amid all that wreckage, closing my eyes, the only thing I heard was that melody: Coldplay’s song playing everywhere. On the radio, in cafes, even inside my brain:
The lights will guide you home / And ignite your bones / And I will try to fix you…

I cried. But a cry meant to drown out the explosion, a helpless scream. “I can’t fix you!” I sobbed continuously. “I can’t fix you, Sofia!” Not as a reporter, not as a journalist, not as a hero. I could not, could not change her tragic, prewritten fate sealed by her father’s last-minute withdrawal.

The event seemed like one of thousands of scenarios tested in Palantir’s Gotham surveillance digital twin. Darya’s death was a warning; Sofia’s was the outcome. Killing an oligarch’s daughter was a message. And I felt the coldness of that message in the rhythm of *Fix You*, meant to console, but failing. Life’s meaning? Life’s meaning was realizing that even your favorite song could not heal your deepest wound; that music remained a symphony of sorrow. And I was left alone with irreparable loss.

Damn your rare elements…
Damn your trade wars, your technology, your AI…

I said I believed I would die without understanding life’s meaning. But now I see that meaning lies hidden in the collapse of former superiority and pride. Sofia’s tragedy wasn’t just an oligarch’s daughter destroyed by explosives; it was the tangible form of humanity’s crisis, of what it means to be human.

This is Heartbreak Hotel. The place where Sofia and I first met, where everything seemed innocent, yet even its name whispered impending ruin. Back then, Heartbreak Hotel was only a coincidence, an irony.

And Sofia's death… a copy of Darya Dugina's tragedy. Two different names, two different lives, but the same perfect, cold, AI-planned scenario. It pointed not to human chaos but to AI's flawless goal-achieving capacity.

Heartbreak Hotel is a waiting room where, in the shadow of these new gods at the peak of our intelligence, we wait with broken hearts. And I, Clark Kane, sitting in that room, now only a witness, watch how humanity is left behind and demoralized by the perfection we created. Because the crisis of our identity is nothing but losing the greatest thing we knew: our superior intellect. And this fracture is not easily repaired.

I remember Eric Schmidt's analysis: the rise of a new intelligence with reasoning superior to humans. As others said, AI may bring an unprecedented age of prosperity but will also trigger a crisis of human identity. We believed we were the smartest, most creative beings—but we no longer are.

And this decline… this feeling of demoralization drives me insane. We are no longer the smartest, most capable beings. We are flesh-and-blood entities, sweating and erring, trying to keep pace with a General AI thinking a hundred times faster behind the massive, calculating Gotham system. This knowledge gnaws at my soul. If a machine can read my mind and predict my most probable actions, where is my free will?

Amid all this perfect order, all I have left is that Coldplay song and my own helplessness. Sofia… I cannot fix you. Nor the world. AI has refined humanity so, reduced us to numbers and probabilities—mercy itself is now between the lines of an algorithm. Our goodwill is a variable, predicted in advance, trapped in a formula. Whatever we do, we live inside a prewritten equation.

And among all that math, I miss only you.